Mary

MARY. By M. E. Braddon,

Author of "Lady Audley's Secret," "Miranda," "The Green Curtain," etc. ∴ ∴ ∴ ∴

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MARY

I

THERE is an hour in the twenty-four that has magic in it, that makes common things strange and ugly things beautiful, and London an enchanted city. It is the hour before sunrise, when a greenish-blue light creeps slowly over the housetops, and the street lamps grow dim. Over the river perhaps there is a flush of rose-colour—the first smile of the new day, but in the streets there is only this pale herald of the dawn.

That strange light lent a certain artistic beauty to the decadence of Sanders Street, which once had dignity and even fashion, but was now a place of tenement houses and squalid shops—a street that had been slowly withering for a century, but had been the pink of respectability, though a little off colour as to fashion, a hundred years ago.

It may have been a caprice of Austin Sedgwick's which brought him through Sanders Street on his way to Tyburnia, after a night spent curiously, the first half at a smart card-party, and the later hours in the East End, where this young man varied the monotony of a government office and the banalities of modern society by an occasional descent into nethermost depths, where people who, having known him first as a queer sort of bloke, who came prying about, and asking questions, had gradually learnt to look upon him as a friend and a helper, and to welcome his appearance among them, and even to reproach him for not coming oftener, although the money

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help he gave was not large or frequent. The men and women he knew were the poorest of the poor, but even these had come to understand that he brought them something better than money.

The street was empty and asleep in that faint light, all windows closely shut by people who considered fresh air a noxious thing. Austin looked at the windows and doors as he passed the silent houses, such noble old doors and doorways—massive, early Georgian. Before one threshold where the door was deeply recessed, between Doric pillars, he came to a sudden stop. For here there was something more vital than Georgian architecture to consider.

A girl was sitting on the doorstep, fast asleep, with her head drooping forward upon her knees, and her face hidden. The hand that hung limp and pale by her side was small—a lady's hand, Austin thought. She was not the kind of night-bird he expected to find upon a doorstep.

"Have you no better place than this to rest in, my poor girl?" he asked, in his low serious voice, bending down to speak to her.

She woke with a start, and looked at him with a countenance that was tragic in its expression of abject fear.

"No, no," she said. "Let me alone."

"I don't want to distress you. I want to help you if I can."

Her head had resumed its drooping attitude. She had spoken in a drowsy voice, and he thought she was falling asleep again.

"Have you no home?" he asked gently.

"No. Can't you let me sleep. I have been walking about all night. The policeman would not let me sleep. Why do you worry me? You are not a policeman."

"I don't mean to be cruel. I will take you to some shelter, where you can have food and rest. You won't be allowed to rest here. The first policeman who comes this way will disturb you."

"I know, I know," she answered, lifting her head suddenly, wide-awake now.

" Then get up and come with me, and I'll find you a safe shelter."

" No, no, no ! I won't go with you—I won't go into any house. There is a safer shelter that I can find for myself."

" You mean that you can throw yourself into the river. That is what you are thinking."

" How do you know ? "

" Your face tells me your thought. My poor girl, be reasonable. I am a gentleman, and I try to be a Christian. Do you think I would deceive you ? "

" I have been deceived—I will never trust anybody again. I can go to the nearest workhouse. I should be safe there, I suppose. I will go nowhere with a stranger."

Her speech was the speech of a lady—voice and accent were refined, and the voice was of a quality that was more attractive to Austin Sedgwick than her face. And that had a certain beauty, perceptible under the disadvantage of haggard cheeks, and pallid lips.

He talked to her for some time. She stood up to listen to him, stood facing him with one pale hand grasping the iron railing. She was tall and slim, and some long familiar words came into his mind as he looked at her.

" Fashioned so slenderly, young and so fair." Slender she was assuredly, of a willowy slenderness as she leant against the railings, faint and wan. And she was young ; but for the rest there was only the delicate modelling of her features, and the pathetic expression of grey eyes with long black lashes, to promise that under happier conditions she might be beautiful.

He remembered her look just now, and a vision of the " dark arch and the swift flowing river " came upon him with a cold thrill. Had he come only in time to save her from that fate ? For a girl to threaten suicide might not mean much ; but there was a resolute look in this girl's face that scared him.

He talked to her seriously, begged her to confide in him.

" I'm afraid you have been feeling the pinch of poverty," he said.

" Three days ago I was starving."

" And since then ? "

" I have been fed and cared for."

" By some good friend ? "

" By a she-devil."

The words came almost in a whisper between set teeth.

" Tell me your story."

" It is too horrible to be told. I suppose there are many such women in London—going about like Satan, seeking whom they may devour. Not like roaring lions, but like creeping snakes. Loathsome, loathsome, loathsome ! "

The passion of resentment in her face as she spoke was dreadful, the sensitive lips trembled, the eyes grew larger and darker; so dark, yet there was fire in them. This young frail creature had a tremendous force of passion, and could have killed an enemy, he thought. All this time no tear had fallen from those vindictive eyes.

He had hard work to win her confidence, but he had the divine gift of sympathy, and he won her at last to believe that he wished her well, and that he was a gentleman. Assured of this, she consented to walk a little way with him. They could not stand and talk on the doorstep any longer—for the dead hours were past, and the street was alive with the traffic of a new day.

It was a quiet neighbourhood, so they could move freely and unnoticed in the dull grey streets, and by and by they came to a poor little coffee-house where a crockery teapot, some cups and saucers, and a stale egg in the window indicated the possibility of breakfast.

She consented to go into this dingy place with him, and dropped half fainting into the nearest chair, where she sat shivering a little, while he ordered as comfortable a meal as the place could furnish. Tea, rolls and butter, with eggs, and a dish of cold ham.

She drank the tea eagerly, but she was not as hungry as she ought to have been, after walking about all night, without food. Austin had to coax her to eat, and even

to make a pretence of hunger on his own part—though the sickly ham and the doubtful egg did not appeal to a man who was accustomed to be " done for " by a retired butler and a cook of experience and capacity.

He persuaded her to eat, and he persuaded her to talk —to talk of that saddest of all subjects, her own history.

Had she any friends ?

No, she was alone in London. Her father had died two years ago, and her only friend had gone to seek his fortune in the Argentine Republic.

" Is that your nearest friend, something more than a friend, the man you are going to marry some day, when he has made his fortune ? "

" No," she answered in a dull voice, and with a gloomy face. " We are not engaged—we were once—but that is over and done with. The tie was broken half a year ago, when he left England."

" And have you no one in London or near London to whom you could go for shelter ? "

" No one. But I suppose there is always the work-house."

Something in her eyes and lips made him think that in her own mind there was that other resource, and that she should have said : " There is always the river."

" Even about the workhouse there would be difficulties —if you are a stranger in London."

" I have lived in Chelsea for the last year."

" And have made no friends there ? "

" No one but my landlady, and our friendship ended when I left off paying her. I suppose I can get shelter in the Chelsea Union ? "

" It is not to be thought of—but I know of a house where you might be safe—and fairly comfortable till there was some kind of employment found for you—something by which you could make a living. I suppose that is what you have thought of. You must want to earn your bread, as other young women do, hundreds of them in this great city."

She gave a weary sigh.

"Life is odious," she said. "It seems hardly worth working for."

"Nonsense. There is always hope. If life is bad to-day, it may be better to-morrow. How old are you?"

"I was nineteen last May."

"In the morning of life——"

"No, in the deep dark night. I have spent my life as prodigal sons spend their fortunes—what does age matter? My life is gone, wasted in a year. If I had stayed at home with my father I should have been a girl—but as it is, I am an old broken-hearted woman. A worthless creature, useless to myself and everybody else."

"Are you a Christian?"

"I was once. I am nothing now. There was a day when I wanted God to help me—to save one little life. I prayed to Him seven days and nights while the life trembled in the balance—while the flame flickered and faded. And he would not hear me. I prayed to Christ the Saviour—Christ who called Lazarus out of the grave, the God who was once man, and who could love and pity men. That was what I had been taught. I knew better after those seven days and nights of endless prayer. I had done with that fable."

"I am very sorry for you," Austin said softly; "but if you will be ruled by me, I think I can put you among those who will give you a decent shelter, and who will help you to a happier frame of mind—people whose mission is to help the helpless. There is a Refuge for friendless women not far from here, and if you will let me take you there, I will answer for your comfort and your safety. You may have to associate with women of a lower grade than yours—but at the worst it will be better than the workhouse. And you may stay there quietly till some kind of employment can be found for you, if you are not too proud to work."

"Proud," she cried, with a short hard laugh. "Do I look like a proud woman?"

"You look and speak like a lady."

"My father was a gentleman and a scholar. If I am

to go on living I must earn my bread somehow—anyhow. Pride will not stand in my way."

"Come, then," said Austin cheerfully.

He paid for the breakfast, and they went out together and walked to the next street, where they met a prowling cab, and on the way Austin tried to learn more of this pale creature whose pinched face might once have been beautiful. Only nineteen, and with such markings from the pencil of care upon the forehead and round the thin lips.

He had learnt nothing but her name, Mary Smith. She had hesitated for an instant between christian and surname, and the "Smith" sounded like an alias.

The cab stopped at a decent-looking house in a street near the Euston Road. The girl looked about her suspiciously as she alighted, and then looked at Austin with beseeching eyes.

"You are not setting a trap for me?" she asked. "You are not deceiving me?"

"What do you think I am made of?" he exclaimed, holding her arm as they stood side by side upon the doorstep, after he had rung the bell. "You will find safety in this house, if not comfort."

A young woman in a black gown and a large white apron opened the door, and, on Austin asking to see the matron, she ushered them into a parlour on the right hand of the passage, where a grey-haired woman was sitting at a desk writing busily, with a heap of papers in front of her.

She was elderly, spare and careworn, and her gown was grey like her hair, and even her complexion had a certain greyness. To meet her in the twilight would be to think one had seen a ghost.

She greeted Austin with a friendly smile and looked from him to the girl called Mary.

"Good morning, Mr. Sedgwick. This is an early visit. What can I do for you?"

"You can be kind and helpful to this lady, who has fallen upon evil days."

"This is hardly a place for ladies," the grey woman answered. The voice was hard, and there was a suspicion of a sneer—a touch of incredulity.

The girl shrank, as from a breath of cold wind.

Austin moved to the window, and the grey woman followed him. They talked together for some minutes in undertones that were inaudible to Mary, and then they turned and came back to the place where she was standing, motionless and very pale.

"Mr. Sedgwick tells me you are homeless, and without resources, and that you are willing to work for your living if we can show you the way. If you are not a fine lady, and if you are willing to work at any employment that offers, you can have a shelter and food in this house, until we find you something better. But you must understand that within these walls there are more sinners than saints, and you may have to rub shoulders with women you may have been brought up to look upon with scorn and aversion."

"Whatever they are, they can't be more unhappy than I am," the girl answered drearily.

"That is understood, then. You know that you are coming into a home made to save sinners, and that charity is the ruling spirit here."

"Do you suppose that I am sinless? Others may have fallen lower, but I am no saint."

"However low you have fallen we will raise you up. That is what we exist for."

The voice had softened, and there was no longer the suspicion of a sneer.

There was little more to be said. The girl turned to Austin Sedgwick, and held out her hand.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she said; and then, almost in a whisper: "It is better than the river. All I wanted was to get away from my old life."

"And you will try to be happy here?"

"I will try to forget that I was ever happy anywhere else."

"Good-bye. I will look in some day, to see how you

are getting on. Good-bye, Mrs. Gurdon, I know you will be kind."

He was gone. And he seemed to take all that there was of actual life away with him. The rest was a dull dream. The grey woman, the grey house, the grey light in the morning sky.

II

AUSTIN SEDGWICK thought much of this girl he had left in the grey woman's charge. It was not the first case of the kind in which he had interested himself. Since he had left Oxford, with a respectable degree and an immense popularity, half his life had been given up to good works.

Mary Smith was not the first friendless woman he had helped ; but it was the first time he had met with a creature so friendless and forlorn and yet a lady.

He had begun to work among the poor while he was at the University, and now that he had been living in London, his own master, with no heavier fetters than his daily task at one of the superior government offices, and with a comfortable income to give backbone to his official salary, he had devoted most of his leisure to that underground London which is a world unknown to the prosperous bachelor, who looks down from a railway carriage at the wilderness of shabby streets, and wonders what kind of people herd together there, and what life can mean, or what it must seem to mean, to such people.

Austin Sedgwick had come to know a great deal about such people. He had got into their lives somehow ; had found the way to understand them, and was able to talk with them on equal terms. The easy way in which the costers of the New Cut would hail him as " governor," and reproach him for not coming to the Free-and-Easy oftener, was what any young friend he took with him would call " an eye-opener." Yes, it was an eye-opener to find how class distinctions might be dropped and man

meet man, as freely as strange dogs meet and gambol together in the gutter.

Mr. Sedgwick, young, good-looking, with fine manners, and independent means, was in request at some of the best houses in west-end London, and as he had a keen gusto for good society, the nights not given to the slums were spent in smart houses, and only his few intimate friends knew that this young man with an eyeglass and a languid manner, always carefully dressed at the top of the fashion, was deeply religious, sedulous in his attendance at the church he loved, and a generous supporter of the priests he believed in, nor did any but those intimate friends and followers know that he spent half his income on the corporal works of mercy.

People sometimes talk of double lives, and it might certainly be said of Austin Sedgwick that his was a double life.

It was a grievance in his family circle that he did not live at home, where the money he spent on " rooms " in Cleveland Gardens would have been of use in the household budget.

His mother and father, who thought themselves paupers, with an income that just scraped below the Super-Tax, were aggrieved because their only son chose to live alone, and spent the whole of his means in his own fashion.

" I should have thought this neighbourhood good enough for any young man in London," said his mother, when Austin was sitting among his womenkind, after dropping in to tea at an hour when he might hope to find them alone. The sitting had been prolonged till the edge of darkness, and there was no fear of any more visitors.

" That's what I say," cried Clementina, the elder of his two sisters. " What's the matter with Eaton Square ? It's within a taxi of everything any reasonable mortal can want. And there is more than room enough for you and your man on the second floor—three good rooms eating their heads off—and I suppose it's a decent address, since if you run your eye along the Directory you'll see that we positively swarm with nobility "

"We've two dukes and three marquises," said Julia, who was seventeen and a half, and not out, but thought she ought to have been.

"I should like to know who you've got in Cleveland Gardens," said Clementina, who was five feet eight, and still known to family and friends as Tiny.

"I've a girl next door who plays the violin five hours a day," answered Austin, rather wearily. "I could make you a present of her."

"And not a title from Number One to Number Thirty,'' said Julia.

"I don't know what people call a title nowadays—but I believe every other householder in the Gardens has been knighted—and I expect to see all the knights transformed into lords whenever the superior article is wanted."

"What you can see in Cleveland Gardens?" sighed his mother, with her customary languor.

"I see nothing wonderful, dearest. Only large airy rooms, and perfect independence; the right to go in and out as I like."

"As if we should refuse you a latch-key!"

"I know you would be kind, but you would listen for my coming in, and would be worried if I was out in the small hours. I am not dissipated, my dear mother, but I love the night, and I should be a source of uneasiness if I lived here. You would be anxious, and my father would ask questions. Where I am, I give nobody the trouble of wondering about me. Mr. and Mrs. Dover are of that high class of servants who behave like automatons."

"Dreadful," sighed his mother. "Suppose you were taken ill. What would happen then?"

"They would send for my doctor, and telephone to you, and would take every possible care of me. My dear mother, it is better for all of us that I should be where I am. I have all the sweets of independence, and I am really as near you as if I were living under this roof—the telephone has annihilated distance."

"When you know I can't work it!" cried his mother piteously.

'But your maid can, and that is the same thing."

"No, it isn't. It's too humiliating for me to know that Stringer can talk to you and I can't."

"You'll get clever at it in time."

"Never! I abhor the odious thing."

"Because you have never tried to use it. 'Never given your mind to it,' as Stringer would say."

This was one of many conversations in his mother's drawing-room, and Austin had also undergone occasional skirmishes with his father after a family dinner, Mr. Sedgwick wanting to know why his only son, who was obviously a paragon of good behaviour, should not have gentlemanly feeling enough to do what was best and most advantageous for his family.

"My dear father, if I thought that the three or four hundred a year that I spend in Cleveland Gardens could be of any substantial use in this house, I would come here to-morrow—but what difference could it make in your five or six thousand?"

"Five or six!" ejaculated his parent. "What are you dreaming of? I have nothing like five thousand a year."

"Nobody has, nowadays. Well, we won't discuss ways and means."

Austin thought of the girl, Mary Smith, but not with the tender pity with which he had often thought of the creatures he had helped, the jetsam and flotsam of the great overcrowded city, the stony labyrinth where such creatures are lost, where it is only by accident they meet the men and women with a will to succour them. It is not on the high road that the good Samaritan of the twentieth century finds his neighbour, but in narrow, crooked streets and nameless places. There was nothing romantic in Austin's discovery of the girl asleep on the doorstep, nothing romantic in her history, so far as she had revealed it—letting him guess rather than telling him the outline of her tragedy.

The man who had gone to South America was not her

husband, and he was not even her faithful lover—for she had no expectation of his return. Austin had asked her if she was engaged to him, and she had answered no, which meant in plain words that he had deserted her, left her alone in London to die on the breast of that stony-hearted stepmother. Her face, when she spoke of this deserter, had told Austin that, if she had ever loved him, that love was dead. But there had been someone she loved passionately—the little life God did not save—the life for which she had prayed seven days and seven nights. And, her prayer not being granted, she had given up all hope in God. There had been a child she loved, when all love for the child's father was over and done with. That was where sorrow had touched her; that was where the wound was deepest, and it was this womanly sorrow that alone made her interesting. Otherwise he had found her hard wood. Austin recalled the sharp lines of her face, the steely look in her eyes, and questioned if she had ever been beautiful, or had possessed even the common charm of girlhood. He doubted if she had ever been what men call "attractive." There was no sentimental weakness in his thought of her. He had never told himself that she had a haunting face, and his dreams had never recalled her image. His thoughts about her were serious and benevolent. He had arranged with the matron at the Rescue Home that she was to be maintained there, at his expense, until some employment could be found for her, but she was never to know that he paid for her board and lodging, or that her position in the house was in any way exceptional. She was to live as the other women lived, and work as they worked.

This had all been settled in half a dozen sentences, while he and Mrs. Gurdon stood by the window, and while Mary Smith waited, out of earshot.

III

THE sun rose earlier now over London, and the London planes and acacias were showing the tender green of newly-opened leaves. Mary Smith had been in the Home for a month, and Austin felt that it would be only human to go and see how she had thriven there. If she was, as he believed, a lady by birth and education, her surroundings must have called upon her fortitude, and perhaps tried her temper.

He was relieved to learn that she had not given trouble. That, from Mrs. Gurdon, was praise.

"And has she got on comfortably with the other women?"

"She has been civil, and they have not complained of her—but I won't tell you that she has made herself a favourite."

"I hardly expected that. She is not of their class."

"She has not a happy disposition. The others would like her better if she could let herself down a little, and be friendly with them—if she were what they call 'jolly.'"

"Are any of the others jolly?"

A shrill soprano voice with a strong East London twang rang out from an upper story, in the refrain of a famous comic song, as if in answer to Austin's question.

Mrs. Gurdon opened the parlour door, and called up the staircase.

"Not so loud, Norah Lee. What are you doing on the stairs? Keep your singing for the workroom, please."

"Are they all like Norah Lee?"

"Most of them. They have their ups and downs—

moping one day, and wanting to jump over the moon to-morrow—all happy-go-lucky, sobbing in church of a Sunday evening, if the sermon stirs up their feelings, and giving no end of trouble on Monday. We may wash vice out of them, but their vulgarity is ingrained. Not even the Gospel can touch that. They are born so, you see, Mr. Sedgwick. Well, you know more about that class than even we do."

"What have you been able to make of Mary Smith? I mean as to her chances of the future. Will she be able to earn her living?"

"In half a dozen ways, if she is lucky, and can be put in the right groove. She's as clever as she can stick, and she doesn't mind work. I put her to housework first; gave her all the upstairs rooms to clean; and though I don't think she had ever been trained as a housemaid, or had done much in that line, she went at it with a will—scrubbed the floors as they aren't often scrubbed, and was on her knees all the morning, and polished the furniture, and made the rooms look better than they've looked for years. But she was like a rag in the evening after, and fainted in the middle of prayers. I told her she had done too much; but she said she liked rough work. It helped her to forget. She must have a sad history."

"Has she told you nothing of her history?"

"Nothing. She turns to stone if I try to question her. She'll talk about other things, but never about herself. After she'd been at the housework a week, I put her to some fine needlework. Her hands were fitter for that than for scrubbing floors."

"And is she a good needlewoman?"

"Exquisite. After that I made her take a class of the most ignorant girls in the place, and teach them to read and speak properly—and to write a hand that could be read."

"That was harder," said Austin.

"Much harder; but she did it. They tried to rot her, but she mastered them—and after a few days they got to like their lessons, and to ask for more. She hadn't been

used to teaching, but she put her back into it, the girls told me. There was nothing lardy-dardy about her. After that I knew she was the right sort—the scrubbing-brush had proved her will—the fine needlework her capacity—and the teaching showed that she had tact as well as talent."

"Then you ought to be able to place her where she may earn a decent living."

"I ought to be able to place her? Yes. But can I do it? There are hundreds of families in which such a girl would be a treasure—but is there one master or mistress who would take her without a character—with no better history than from the streets to this Refuge?"

"You will have found out a good deal more about her when she has been with you six months, and there are people who are liberal minded, and will take your word for her merit and honesty."

Mrs. Gurdon answered dubiously.

"One might happen upon such people. But do you mean to go on paying for her—for half a year?"

"Why not?"

"Oh, I know how generous you are—but it's a good deal to spend on one case."

"Perhaps. But doesn't this strike you as an exceptional case?"

"The girl is exceptional certainly—not a lovable girl, but interesting."

"Kindness may bring out a lovable side of her character—and I know you will be kind."

Mrs. Gurdon sighed before she answered.

"I can't pretend to be a lovable person myself," she said. "Our work is apt to harden us. I dare say people think that the continual association with repentant sinners would make us fountains of tenderness and pity. But somehow even the best of them are disappointing, and the worst of them are incorrigible liars. When one has had ten years' disappointments and deceptions, fine feelings are worn threadbare. After that one acts upon principle, and people who act on principle are tough."

" If you were not a good woman you would not have been here ten years."

" I was a kinder woman when I took up the work, Mr. Sedgwick—but you are not here to talk about me. Would you like to see Mary ? "

" I would—very much."

" Then I'll send her to you. It will be better for you to see her alone. You can ring the bell when you have finished your talk, and I'll come and fetch her."

Austin paced the room in a reverie while he waited for his protégée, stopping sometimes to look out of window at the shabby street, and wondering if Mary had seen nothing better since she had been under that roof. The prospect from the back windows was worse most likely, as it was in a busy quarter of London, where ground was too precious to allow of open spaces.

A dull house, a dull street, a squalid neighbourhood—but shelter and safety ! Was not that enough for a friendless woman to be thankful for ?

The door opened, and Mary Smith came to him, shyly, but with a smile that faintly lighted one of the saddest faces he had ever seen.

He held out his hand, and his clasp upon the thin cold hand that met his was strong and friendly.

And now for the first time he realized the exquisite refinement of a face that few would have praised for beauty. Colour, roundness, brilliancy, all the attributes of commonplace beauty were wanting. The cheeks were hollow, and the forehead had premature lines across its whiteness—the chin was pinched and sharpened, the lips were pale. Every feature had a delicacy of line that Austin had often seen in marble—but seldom in flesh and blood. The face recalled faces he had admired in the gallery of the Vatican: portraits of unremembered Empresses, low brows under plaited hair, and the line from brow to lip, as delicately drawn as it was here in this living face.

The pencilling of the eyebrows, the moulding of the heavy eyelids, the depth of darkness in the eyes, were of

a rare perfection. The hair was a pale brown, and there were no golden lights in it—shadowy hair which offered no claim to admiration, but which framed the thin face and harmonized with its subdued colouring, if that could be called colour in which all warmth was wanting.

Mary stood before him patiently during a silence that was longer than it should have been, but there was neither embarrassment nor self-consciousness in her manner. She stood before him, tall and slender, straight as an arrow, and she was the first to speak.

"It is very kind of you to come to see me," she said gravely.

"I ought to have come sooner perhaps—but Mrs Gurdon does not like visitors. I am anxious to know if you are comfortable and contented."

"Quite contented."

"I'm afraid you must find life rather dull in this house."

"I have not been used to gaiety, and I could not bear it if it came in my way. The only thing that jars here is the high spirits of the inmates. There are some of them who seem not to know what sadness means—and yet most of them have gone through deep waters."

"It is a blessing not to be too finely made."

"I am quite contented; and I am grateful to you for bringing me here. You found me in a dark hour, and I dare say you thought me rude and ungrateful. I am in a better mood now, and I begin to feel how much I owe you."

"Mrs. Gurdon tells me that you are clever and industrious; and that you have the art of teaching, which is a rare gift."

"I like teaching those rough girls. It is new and strange to find oneself face to face with such ignorance, such hopeless indifference to all the best things in life. It is strangest of all that they can have got so little out of their schools—only a smattering of things they never can understand—scraps of knowledge that seem to darken their ignorance. I asked them if they knew anything

about geography. Yes, one of them said they knew it inside out—geography was Tuesday mornings. And that very one asked me if an archipelago was higher than an archbishop. But I never laugh at them—for they are good-natured and do their best. It is I who am learning from them—learning how to teach children. Mrs. Gurdon hopes to get me a situation before long."

"That will be a dull life, I fear, teaching children in a middle-class family."

"What right have I to want anything better?" she said with a long-drawn sigh. "The question with me has been life or death. The river or an ounce of laudanum—I could get it at the chemist's a pennyworth at a time—or any kind of work that could be found for me, any kind of roof that would shelter me."

"Do not take too dark a view of the situation. Mrs. Gurdon and I will do all we can. And now tell me about your life here. Is it really comfortable?"

"It is a refuge," she answered enigmatically. "I am quite comfortable while I have work. That is the only anodyne."

"Do you get enough fresh air? Do you go for a walk every day?"

She smiled at his simplicity.

"I have not been farther than the yard since you brought me here, but that is my fault. Mrs. Gurdon takes some of the inmates for a walk every day; three or four at a time. She could not manage more. So in that way they all get an airing once a week, or so. I refused to go in one of her batches; she was kind and did not force me—so I tramp round the yard every morning, and think of the prisoners in Reading Gaol."

"You know that poem?"

"I know every heart-breaking word of it. My father knew the man who wrote it."

"Was your father by way of being literary?"

"He was steeped to the lips in literature."

He longed to question her more, but refrained. It was something to have been told as much as this, by lips

that had seemed so resolutely locked. He shook hands with her again and went away.

When he had gone some distance, carrying her image with him as if it had been a living presence, it occurred to him that if she had to live six months in that dreary house—in order to get a "character"—he might do something to lighten her captivity. He might take her for a walk once in a way, if Mrs. Gurdon consented—and Mrs. Gurdon had known him so long, that he had no fear of being refused.

The very superior government office in which he laboured closed its monumental doors upon the outside world at four o'clock, and as the spring days were lengthening, there would be time to take Mary Smith for an hour's walk, before his evening engagements necessitated his return to Cleveland Gardens for that restful hour with a book, which was a *sine qua non* with him, before going out to dinner. Women who are careful of their beauty demand an hour's sleep before putting on their evening splendour; the professional diner-out likes a quiet half-hour with his note-book or treasury of wit and anecdote; and for Austin an hour's serious reading was the best preparation for an evening of trivial gaiety.

After that brief interview at the Refuge he thought of Mary Smith oftener than he had thought before her face came out of the shadows. Until that afternoon the face had been a vague memory, the voice unremembered. There had been nothing but the impression that she was a star that had fallen from its orbit, or what Mrs. Gurdon would call "an exceptional case." But now she was a woman, young, interesting, bravely facing an unknown future that must needs be dreary—as she was not the kind of woman to fall on her feet, as the phrase goes, to find the swift success that sometimes offers to marketable charms. Whatever the other women might be, there was nothing "happy-go-lucky" about Mary Smith.

"I am not falling in love with her," he told himself very often. "She interests me, but she doesn't attract me."

He let some weeks go by before he called at the Refuge.

It was the sweetness of the April weather, the sunshine on the tender green of opening leaves, the blue water, and the colour upon the water-fowls' plumage that set him thinking of Mary Smith, as he walked across the Park on his way from his office to his club.

Air that was like a caress, sunshine that glorified common things, and Mary Smith had nothing better than the yard, the miserable yard that made her think of "Reading Gaol."

He went straight from his office to the Refuge next day. He was in the dreary parlour at a quarter past four, telling Mrs. Gurdon his notion that he might do Mary Smith a small kindness by taking her for a walk on Hampstead Heath. He had a taxi-cab at the door and they could be at Hampstead in half an hour.

Mrs. Gurdon was evidently troubled by the proposal. If anybody else had made the suggestion, she would have negatived it on the instant. But Sedgwick had been a staunch supporter of the Refuge. He had given his own money liberally, and had collected money from his friends, and had hunted up regular subscribers. The Refuge could not do without Austin Sedgwick.

Yet the thing he proposed was extraordinary, and its effect might be pernicious.

"What will the other women think? Not one of them has ever been allowed to leave this house for more than an hour's walk with me, till she has gone into service. If it came to going for walks with their friends or even their relatives, you'd soon see the end of the Institution."

"But you have yourself admitted that this is an exceptional case," Austin said earnestly. "You must see yourself that this girl is of a different class."

"All the more danger. The others are jealous and watchful of her—and if they find the strictest of our rules has been broken in her case—there'll be rank rebellion. You don't know what they are when their backs are up."

"Need they know anything about it?"

"Of course they'll know. They are horribly inquisitive."

"After all you are not accountable to them. You have only to put your foot down."

"I'm always doing that—putting it down, and holding it down—tight."

Her lips tightened as she spoke, and Austin remembered that her chief merit was the power to manage the unmanageable. She was kind in her own way, and her compassion was inexhaustible; but it was part of her business to rule the incorrigible, and she was no shirker.

She yielded at last, but she reminded Austin that it was Smith's fault that she had not been beyond the yard. She had resolutely refused to go for an airing with Mrs. Gurdon and some of the girls, a pleasant walk in Regent's Park for instance.

"She was too proud to come with me and the others." Austin smiled.

"She may be too proud to come with me," he said.

But on Mary Smith being summoned, and the excursion proposed, a lovely carnation came to her cheeks, and her eyes brightened.

"You are too kind," she faltered. "But why should I be a trouble to you?"

"You will not be a trouble. Please put on your hat. Mrs. Gurdon has been very good in letting you come which is a breach of the rule of the house."

"I know, I know," Mary said, with a grateful look at the matron. "It is more than kind of you. But you have always been kind, even when I was gloomy and disagreeable."

She went away quickly, and came back neatly dressed for out of doors. Her black straw hat and little cloth jacket—things that Mrs. Gurdon had bought for her with money provided by Austin—were of the cheapest, and she carried the stamp of poverty, but it was not the stamp of low birth or commonness.

Austin promised to take her back to the Refuge before six o'clock, and in less than half an hour they were on the Heath in the glory of the westering sun. Her face showed the rapture of the change from the stony yard to

that lovely spot, and she soon began to talk freely, but of indifferent things, and Austin was careful not to scare her by troublesome questions about herself. He talked of books, and found that she had read much more than the average girl of twenty, even in this highly educated age. And by and by, when they were sitting opposite each other at a pastrycook's tea-table, he ventured to talk of her father.

"You told me he was steeped in literature. It was from him you learnt all you know about books, I suppose?"

"It was from him I learnt everything I know. He was my only teacher."

"And you were very fond of him, no doubt?"

"I was as fond of him as he would let me be. I adored him when I was a child, and he was very kind to me in those happy days; but as I began to understand him better, I knew that he could never love me. I think he tried to care for me, but there was more strength than warmth in his nature. He had loved my mother passionately, but I do not think he ever cared for anybody after he lost her. I was their only child, and they had been married a good many years before I was born, and I don't think either of them wanted me. They were all the world to each other. My mother's health failed soon after my birth, and she died before I was a year old."

She went on to tell him of her father's work in literature. He had taken high honours at Oxford, and gone to the Bar, but he had soon wearied of a waiting race, and his legal career had been a failure. He had an income that allowed him to please himself as to a profession, and it was not till he married that he set himself seriously to earn a living. He was a student by nature, and wanted nothing more in life than his tasks and the woman he loved. Without much consideration as to his young wife's inclination —taking it for granted that she must care for the things he cared for, he established his home in a fishing village on the Cornish coast, where he had found an old house that gave him ample room for his books, and thirty acres of meadow and wood where his wife, who was country-

bred, could indulge her passion for gardening. The garden was not finished when the frail life snapped, and the student was left to a scholarly solitude. It was then that he began to write with a power that he had never known in his happier days. He lived only to write and to think—a gloomy, self-contained, unhappy man.

His contributions to the Press won immediate recognition—and he wrote a book upon political economy that was a triumph of art, from a man who had shunned all beaten tracks, and might be supposed to know very little about his fellow-men. He had never lived among the classes of whom he wrote, had rarely rubbed shoulders with them; but he knew them from the inside, by the searchlight of an intellect that was intense rather than wide. If he had not been wanting in the divine gift of sympathy he might have been one of the most popular writers of the age; but, though he won a high place among the thinkers of his day, his followers were more distinguished than numerous. Style was his supreme gift, and it was a distinction to be familiar with his work.

As the years went on, changes for the worse occurred in his financial position, the value of his inherited property dwindled almost to zero, and he came to be dependent on his pen for an income.

These and many other particulars of her father's life and character Austin learned from Mary Smith in the course of quiet walks in the open spaces of North London, and quiet sittings in humble tea-shops.

She liked to talk of her father, and of the rambling seventeenth-century farm-house under the hill at Port Jacob. But of herself she spoke little, and Austin waited with infinite patience till she should begin to feel that he was her friend, and that self-revelation would come.

It came at last, suddenly, in a rush of passionate feeling, when physical weakness had lessened her power of self-restraint. Her work in the Refuge had begun to tell upon her. She had been suffering from excruciating headaches, the headaches of anæmia, and in one of their evening walks Austin found her silent and languid, and

soon tired. He made her sit upon a bench in a solitary part of the park, and he waited quietly while she rested. She was deadly pale, and presently when she began to talk he found that she was on the verge of hysteria. Then it was that he heard her story of the woman from whom she had fled a few hours before he found her, jetsam from the sea of wicked London. Then for the first time he knew from what foul depths she had escaped. The woman had found her lying on a bench on the Embankment, absolutely starving. She had been turned out of her lodgings nearly a week before, and she had wandered about Chelsea and Battersea penniless and helpless, till she had drifted somehow to the Embankment near Blackfriars. And it was in the cold dawn that the woman had found her—a kindly creature, stout and prosperous-looking, with a pleasant voice, in which she expressed compassion for this poor wanderer, and offered her shelter and food. She was not rich, she said, but she had a comfortable home, and she loved to share her comforts with those who were poorer. She took the wanderer to her house half dead, and only able to creep by her side—a decent-looking house in a narrow street, hidden in a labyrinth of streets old and new. All that followed was like a dream. There was food—a comfortable bed—a bath—clean linen—all things decent. And there this lonely creature was allowed to lie and rest for days and nights that seemed long, and the restfulness of those long days and nights was luxury for the tired limbs, the aching feet, the burning head. When she questioned her benefactress, asked for her help in getting a place as a servant, or work of any kind, no matter how humble, she was told that there was no need for hurry. She had to get her strength back, and then no doubt something could be found.

"The fact is, I am getting very fond of you," the woman told her, "and I should like to keep you with me in this comfortable home."

Mary had noticed that the woman locked the door of her room when she left her, and this was frightening.

She had tried her door several times, and had always found it locked. The woman laughed when she asked her why this was done.

"Girls are capricious," she said. "You might take it into your head to run away."

Then came the horror of it all.

She had fallen asleep over her needlework, and it seemed the dead of the night. Her candle had burnt out, and the room was dark. She heard the key turn in the lock, and saw a light under the door, and then she heard her friend's voice soft and conciliatory. "Remember she's quite the lady," and a rough voice answered, "Gammon and spinach," and the door was opened and a man came in, carrying a candle; a big burly man, with a red face—a man who looked like a farmer, and who exhaled that compound of stables, cowhouse, and pigsty, which indicates agricultural surroundings.

And then came a scene of terror and despair. The man talked to her in speech that she had never heard before, with brutality that she had never known before. She ran towards the door, but the key was inside now, and he turned it before she could get there. He caught her by the arm, and held her as if in a vice, the thin arm pinioned by his broad rough hand. She might have seen such men, carters or ploughmen, on the Cornish farms but such a man had never touched her.

She tried to wrench her arm from a grasp that hurt her as if it had been red-hot iron. She shrieked for help, but in that house a woman's shriek counted for nothing. He tried to kiss her. She felt the hot coarse lips upon her face, and horror gave her strength to beat him off. A cloud came across her eyes, her brain began to swim, and she dropped in a heap upon the floor, with just power to hold her outstretched arms above her head in an attitude that expressed frantic terror.

The man moved away ever so little, looking down at her curiously.

"I seem to have got into the wrong box," he grumbled. "Stand up, lass. I'm not a tiger. Perhaps you don't

quite know where you are, or your manners would be more suitable."

" I thought I was with a kind woman who took pity upon me when she found me starving in the street."

" Uncommon kind. Oh, you poor creature ! "

And then he told her in his rough speech what the house was—and when she implored him to let her out of the room, and out of that accursed house, he took pity upon her and was kind.

" You'd never get out by yourself," he said. " You've fallen into a trap that doesn't open easy. But I've got daughters of my own—two of the prettiest girls in the West Riding, and I'll do what I can to take a modest wench out of the pit of hell ! Put on your hat, lass, and come along o' me."

Her hands shook so that he had to help her with her hat and coat, and then he took her down the stairs through a dimly-lighted passage to the street door, where a woman—the kind woman of the Embankment—came out of a room close by and tried to stop them.

There was an altercation, violent words on either side, while Mary Smith hung mute and trembling on the Yorkshireman's arm. After a torrent of abuse, the woman tried actual violence, tore Mary's hat off, and caught her by the hair.

" I'll spoil your beauty, you ungrateful cat."

" Open that door, you old harridan," roared the farmer. " And do it quick, before I whistle for the police."

He had put the girl's hat on her head again, roughly but kindly. He took her up in his arms as if she had been a child, and held her on his shoulder while the woman opened the door, which was bolted and chained, and then he went lightly down the steps with that frail figure held securely with his right arm.

" I feel like the Good Shepherd," she heard him mutter.

After this he did what he could for her—wanted to give her money, which she refused, and then left her near King's Cross, telling her that if anyone followed her from that evil house, she had only to put herself in the charge

of a policeman. He was going back to Yorkshire by the early morning train, he told her. He had had a sickener.

This was the story Mary Smith told her benefactor, in snatches of speech, and with heart-breaking sobs, as she sat on the bench in the deserted side-walk of the People's Park. There was very little attraction for the people in that narrow walk between young limes, and this evening Mary and her friend had it all to themselves.

"I wanted to tell you," she said, "I wanted you to know the depth of my degradation."

"There was no degradation—the man was right. You were a helpless creature caught in a trap. Forget all that horror, Mary, or think of it as something that another woman suffered. You are going to be a new woman and begin a new life. Forget it all."

"Do you think one can ever forget? It is never out of my thoughts. It comes back to me in my sleep, a horrible dream. I feel that man's grasp upon my arm, and I try to scream, but my throat is dry and no sound comes. I shall never forget."

She grew calmer by and by, and she told him that work, nothing but work, could help her. Mrs. Gurdon was trying to get a situation for her—but it seemed very difficult.

IV

YES, it was difficult. Mrs. Gurdon was full of compassion for Mary Smith. She admired her and believed in her, and she had worked hard in her behalf—had answered advertisements, and called upon agents, who professed themselves able to find places for governesses, companions, and lady-helps of every grade. But if it was difficult to find a situation for a young woman with a character, it was still more difficult to find acceptance for a young woman whose only reference was from the matron of a rescue home. The agent shrugged her shoulders and sighed—the case was hopeless.

"The very word 'refuge' would finish the business," she said. "And indeed it would do me harm even to mention such a case. I don't think you know the delicacy required in the conduct of such an agency as mine. With my superior connections I cannot be too careful."

It was in vain to plead. Mary Smith was not to be thought of. Even as a lady-help, to wait upon an invalid, and dust rooms, and polish furniture, and make herself generally useful, there was no place for a woman out of a refuge. Mrs. Gurdon pleaded in vain. If her protégée was not a sinner, she had herded with sinners, and she was impossible! That was the word Mrs. Gurdon heard wherever she applied. Mary Smith was impossible.

She told Austin Sedgwick of her hopeless failure, when Mary had been half a year in the Refuge, and had shown herself staunch in her willingness to work, her ability, and her readiness to face the battle of life where it was hardest.

"Let me go as a general servant, a mere drudge," she said.

"Oh, you don't know how hard it would be—or the danger of it: unless I could put you with good people—and they are so rare. If it comes to the worst, I might get you a place as a parlour-maid—domestic servants are scarce—and people are not so particular as they used to be."

Austin heard the result of Mrs. Gurdon's efforts with regret for the sake of the girl who wanted to be of use in the world, to work, and to forget.

"Well, my good soul, all you can do is to make her useful where she is, and to trust in Providence."

"I don't see my way out of it," the matron said despondingly. "You oughtn't to go on paying for her—and she oughtn't to be here any longer. It isn't a fit place for her."

"She is safe. That is something. As to the cost of her maintenance—it's not worth a thought."

But the girl herself cost him many thoughts. Mrs. Gurdon was right. The Refuge was not a fitting home. Mary Smith ought not to be a dweller under that roof. It was well that she had found shelter there in her desolation; but to make that house her home, to live there and work there among fallen women, with no better hope than to succeed Mrs. Gurdon, years hence, as matron—to spend her life among sinners—that was too horrible to contemplate.

There were the colonies. There were countries to which she might go, leaving her history behind her. There was all that vast new world, where she need have no higher recommendation than her education and her charming personality. If the worst came to the worst, he must find friends for her in Australia or Canada, and he must help her to emigrate.

In the meantime he saw her as often as he could spare an afternoon from his social engagements, and sometimes when he had pledged himself to his sisters to meet one of their sweet girl friends in Eaton Square, he was sitting

opposite Mary Smith, in some humble tea-shop in Somers Town, talking of the books they knew and the things they had thought about. She was quite at her ease with him now, and would talk of anything but herself and her sad young history. Never since that afternoon of hysterical distress had she told him anything about herself, or alluded to her revelation of that hour.

It was while he was talking to her, this afternoon in early June, when sunshine and summer air were coming in at the open door, near which they sat, and when the suburban street looked almost gay, that he stopped point-blank in the midst of an animated conversation.

"Have you ever done much reading aloud?" he asked her.

"I used to read to my father after his sight began to fail. I had to read to him for long hours, and sometimes very late at night, when he was sleepless. I was useful to him then, and I think he was beginning to care for me."

She broke down suddenly, and covered her face with her hands to hide the streaming tears.

"I'm afraid I have touched an old wound," Austin said gently.

"A wound that can never be healed. He was beginning to love me. Every day brought us nearer together, and I left him—just when he wanted me most. He had no one else—no one but servants."

"Try to forget."

"No, no. I want to remember. What can I give him but remorse and bitter tears? He died in little more than a year after I left him. We might have been happy in that last year, if I had stayed."

She dried her tears, and begged Austin to forgive her for making a scene.

It was not much of a scene. They were almost alone in the little shop. There was only a youth with his sweetheart, whispering and giggling together at the farthest table. The shopkeeper was sitting behind her counter, half asleep, and nodding over a piece of crochet.

"I had a reason for asking you that question," Austin

told her. "If you are a good reader and can read for three or four hours at a stretch, I think I could get you the post of reader to an invalid—an elderly man, who was seriously injured by a fall from his horse thirty years ago, and who has been only half alive since that accident. It would not be an onerous position, as you would have nothing to do but read aloud whenever he was in the humour to listen to you—dull books, sometimes perhaps, but never stupid or vulgar books. You would have no nursing to do, no sick-room attendance. His valet and a footman wait upon him, move him from room to room, and minister to all his wants."

"Such an occupation would be delightful, but would such a man take me without a character—take me from a Refuge?"

"That would make no difference with him. He has not a common mind. He would be interested in your story, if you would let me tell him."

"I don't think I could bear that."

"Well, if it must be so, I will leave you to tell your own story, when you come to understand the man."

"Is he a friend of yours? Have you known him a long time?"

"All my life. He is my uncle, my mother's brother, but as wide as the poles asunder in his view of life. She is a good woman, a God-fearing Christian, and a staunch churchwoman, but hide-bound with conventions. He is an eccentric, an agnostic, but broad-minded and noble in his contempt for small things. It happens curiously that his last reader, his reading girl, as he called her, has taken it into her head to go to Canada where her future husband is waiting for her, and he wants someone to fill her place. I think you would suit him, if you can read as well as I fancy you can."

"It seems too good—much too good," the girl answered sadly.

"But you would like it."

"There is hardly anything I should like so well. Such good fortune could only come in a fairy-tale."

"I told you that life is not all gloom. There are flashes of sunlight—and I hope this may mean lasting sunshine. My uncle is rich and generous—capable of doing great kindnesses. If you will be ready for me at half-past four to-morrow afternoon, I will drive you to Warburton House, and you shall see him. He is always at home, poor soul, fastened to his 'mattress grave,' as Heine called it. I will telephone to him on my way home, and prevent his making any engagement till he has seen you. I know you would suit him."

It was his knowledge of the man rather than of the girl that gave him this assurance. Mary Smith had just the personality to please a fastidious eccentric. Her refinement, her beauty—so subdued in colour, so delicate in form—that it could never be accepted as beauty by the vulgar—a certain gracefulness in all her movements—were attributes to which Conway Field would give their full value. He was a connoisseur in humanity as he was in art, and as difficult to please in the manners and appearance of the people about him, as he was in the modelling of a Chelsea shepherdess or the miniature painting in a Book of Hours.

Austin called at Warburton House next morning, in time to see his uncle at his breakfast of diaphanous toast and weak tea.

Mr. Field gave him a finger.

"You are early, my dear boy. Don't apologize. I am always glad to see you. You are one of the few, the very few, that I am glad to see."

"I think I have found you a reading girl."

"I'm glad to hear it. My wretched eyes are tired to death with reading by lamplight. Can she read?"

"I hope so."

"I am tired of hoping—and is she a girl?"

"Two-and-twenty at most."

Mr. Field sighed.

"I have found that those who owned to two-and-twenty were my idea of five-and-thirty—but that doesn't matter. I don't want extreme youth—only I have to live some

part of my life with the creature, and I sicken at the sight of a clumsy figure and coarse hands. Look at my reading girl, as you go out—look at the refinement, the simplicity —I have had a long procession of reading girls and have never found simplicity or refinement—pretty faces often, freshness and bloom sometimes, but no simplicity. The pretty ones were all conceited, and presumed upon the consciousness of charms which their vanity magnified. Never refinement—never simplicity—but plenty of affectation, a miserable reproduction of the society girl's manner, picked up across a counter, or in a milliner's showroom. Oh, those girls, officious, troublesome, stupid ! If your protégée has none of these faults, she is a *rara avis.*"

" She has one fault."

" Not red hair ? " with a shudder.

" Oh, no."

" Not a chronic cold in her head ? "

" No, no."

" What is her name ? "

" Mary Smith."

" Thank God. I have been sickened by a Ruby and a Gladys, a Lily and a Beryl. Never a Jane or a Sarah. Mary is a name I love. Smith is at least inoffensive."

" I believe this girl may suit you. Her only drawback is that she has never been in a situation of any kind, and she can give no references."

" But you know all about her ? "

" Only that her history is a sorrowful one."

" The usual thing, I suppose ? "

" She has told me very little."

Mr. Field shrugged his shoulders.

" I have no prejudices," he said, with his brilliant smile—a smile that was often ironical and sometimes pathetic ; a smile that lighted up the wan face. " If I ever had any, I have outlived them. They don't stand the wear and tear of thirty years' solitary confinement."

Thirty years ! It was heart-breaking to think of it. Austin Sedgwick bent down, and reverently kissed the

pale thin hand that lay upon the satin coverlet. For three eventful decades in which the world had been moving from change to change, spoiling old beautiful things, and calling their work progress, inventing new ways of wasting strong young lives, and calling it the march of science, Conway Field had been crippled, helpless, joyless, lying in his " mattress grave." Solitary he need not have been, since he had three married sisters and their offspring, all eager to visit and cheer him, and one single sister who was obtrusively affectionate, and would have liked nothing better than to live in his house and watch over him with unrelenting tenderness. But suffering had soured a temper that had never been angelic, and Conway Field generally spoke of his sisters and their progeny as " the herd."

" If their name had not been legion, I might have been almost fond of them," he told Austin, from whom he had no reserves.

Two only of the legion, Austin and his cousin George Bertram, had found favour with the invalid. Of those two nephews he was really fond, and his liking for them had kindled golden hopes in the hearts of the two mothers, Mrs. Sedgwick and Mrs. Bertram. Each of these hopeful ladies was secretly assured that her son would inherit the bulk of the Field wealth, but each sister exercised a prudent reticence in keeping this faith to herself.

It was five o'clock when Austin and his protégée drove into the courtyard of Warburton House, one of those rare mansions in the little world of Mayfair which still remained as an evidence of the dignity with which rank and wealth was clothed in the early Georgian era. It was not as grand as Chesterfield House, nor as stately as Devonshire House, but it was more secluded ; shut in by high walls and massive oaken gates from the dull street that had once been gay with running footmen, and the chairmen's flaring links, from midnight to the edge of dawn.

Mary Smith looked round her wonderingly, but was silent. She did not know that London held such a solemn courtyard, such gloomy splendour.

"Does your uncle live in that great stern house?" she asked.

"Does it frighten you?"

"A little."

"You will see splendour inside, but less gloom. My uncle has surrounded himself with beautiful things in the thirty years that he has been confined to his wheel-chair."

"Thirty years! Oh, that is dreadful!"

"I don't know how he would have lived through the years if he had not been a connoisseur and a collector," Austin said. "Every picture he buys—every etching or bit of china, helps him over a little time. The weeks and months go by somehow. I hope you are fond of art."

"I love looking at pictures, but I know nothing except that they are wonderful. I have seen the Louvre, and the galleries and churches in Belgium."

"You never told me that you had been on the Continent," Austin said rather reproachfully.

"For one month of my life only. It belongs to the time I try to forget."

They were waiting in the hall while a servant went to see if his master was ready to receive them.

The great square hall was hung with Gobelins tapestry, and it was peopled with world-famous statues, the Venus of the Capitol, the Dying Gladiator, the Belvidere Apollo, fine copies by a modern Italian, and the frieze above the tapestry was an original work by Thorwaldsen, the story of Cupid and Psyche.

The footman came back while Mary was looking about her, lost in wonder at the splendour of those marble figures against the background of rich colour.

"Mr. Field was disengaged and would like to see them," and having made this intimation, the man led the way up the broad staircase to a long gallery on the first floor, in which the walls were covered with pictures, and where there were several folding screens accommodating water-colour drawings, etchings and pastels.

In the middle of this spacious gallery there was one

solitary statue—the figure of a girl seated on a rush-bottom chair, reading. She was only half dressed, as if she had stopped in the midst of her simple toilet, to read some absorbing book. A long plait of hair hung over her naked shoulder, and her shift and corset suggested the humblest rank of life. The face was thoughtful and sweet, of a pensive beauty, a face in repose, but a living face. The charm of the statue was its reality—a page out of the simple life. The girl, the chair she sat upon, the coarse shift and common stays, the scanty petticoat, all were the things seen every day in humble dwellings. The statue had made a sensation in the International Exhibition of 1862, and had been discovered later in Florence by Conway Field.

"That is my uncle's 'Reading Girl,' one of his most cherished acquisitions," said Austin softly, as they went in at the door which the servant was holding open for them.

Mary Smith was silent. Very pale, and with lips that were faintly tremulous, she followed her friend across the spacious room to the motionless figure near the hearth, and found herself face to face with the man upon whose will her fate depended.

A pale wan face, with a wasted frame, hands that were almost transparent, lying in languid abandonment upon a black and gold coverlet of Chinese embroidery, a figure that was infinitely pathetic in its enforced repose; but out of the pale face there flashed the steely light of eyes that seemed to look through material forms to the soul behind them. Standing there, dumb and nerve-shaken, Mary felt as if she could have no secrets from this man—no choice of how much of her dismal story to tell or to withhold from him. He could read her pitiful record as if her mind were an open book.

"Please take that chair, Miss Smith," he said, pointing to the one next his own, and then testily to his nephew, who was standing in front of the low wood fire: "Sit down, Austin, for God's sake."

The windows were open, and the room was golden with

the flowers of early summer, white lilac, pale hothouse roses, Parma violets.

Austin dropped hastily into the nearest chair, remembering his uncle's dislike of anyone standing over him. And the young man and his protégée were thus established on each side of the invalid.

"My nephew tells me you are a capable reader," he said, with his steady gaze on the girl's face. "Pray, has he ever heard you read?"

Mary smiled.

"He knows that I used to read to my father, when his sight began to fail."

"For an hour at a time, perhaps, or half an hour? And then you were tired, and your throat began to hurt you, eh?"

"For four or five hours, if he was sleepless——"

"What kind of book. Sensation novels?"

"Almost every kind of book, except novels."

"What was your father?"

"A critic, and a political writer."

"Indeed!"

"I read books that were sent for him to review—and sometimes his old favourites, the books he had loved when he was at Oxford."

The severe eyebrows were raised over the wonderful eyes.

"Then your experience makes for intelligence and refinement. But the crucial question remains: Whether you can read aloud? I have had so many reading girls who couldn't read, that you must forgive me if I am difficult. Will you give me a taste of your quality?"

"With pleasure."

"Then here is one of my favourite Ruskins—the 'Queen of the Air.' Read the page I have marked."

She read the eloquent lines in a low level voice, quietly, with no exaggerated emphasis—the voice that can soothe jaded nerves, and her accent was irreproachable.

"Can you read French?"

" I read many French books to my father. I'm afraid my pronunciation is British. My father sometimes laughed at my accent, but he was satisfied if I read the words distinctly."

" Well, I won't ask you to give me a sample ; but you must read my French classics if you stay with me. I may be able to improve your accent, if it is faulty. I think you may suit me if you can stand the work—to read long hours to a peevish old man, in a house where nothing joyous ever enters, to come and go at my bidding—to come to me at midnight, and read till the first streak of dawn perhaps, to have no pleasant words, no sign of gratitude, from a mind diseased and a body in pain ? Can you stand that, Miss Smith ? Have you more patience than the generality of girls of your age ? "

" I have had more sorrow than the generality of girls," she answered quietly.

" You have learnt in suffering. Well, sorrow is the best school for patience."

" I have to earn my living somehow, and there is no task I should like better than to read good literature to an invalid. I do not think you would be rude or unkind to anyone who tried honestly to please you."

" I hope I should not be unkind ; but I won't vouch for courtesy. My nerves were shattered thirty years ago. You will have to make large allowances. Will you come to me, knowing this ? "

" I shall be glad to come."

" That is enough. My nephew shall arrange everything for you. There is a wilderness of rooms on the two floors above this, and my housekeeper shall find you comfortable quarters."

This was all. She was to begin her duties next day, or as soon as possible.

" Women never take a step in life without wanting new clothes. If you have to buy frocks, please do not make a lugubrious choice. Most women look their best in black—but, as I have to see the same figure every day and nearly all day long, I always ask my reading girls

to dress in pale soft colours that blend harmoniously with the other things I have about me."

"I shall try to please you," the girl answered, in her serious voice.

"Let my nephew advise you. He has a fine eye for colour—and I think he is your friend."

"He is the only friend I have."

"And a safe one, which is more than I would say of the average man of thirty. That will do."

He held out his hand to her—the pale hand which was a history of his life in little—the hand that had not held a gun, or a horse's bridle for thirty years—the hand of a man who had done with all that life means for the living world of men.

Austin observed the offered hand, and knew that Mary Smith had won signal favour. Never had he seen any reading girl so honoured. His uncle had been liberal in his dealings with them, but had held them at an immeasurable distance; reluctantly owning to himself that they were human.

Mary Smith went down the broad staircase, and walked past the white figures in the hall as if she had been moving in a dream. She had no consciousness of the marble floor or of the gravel in the courtyard. She was walking beside Austin in the street before she could find speech.

"Am I really to consider myself engaged?" she asked simply.

"Of course you are. Didn't you hear my uncle say that he left all details to me? That means salary, your holidays, and any other matters. I do not suppose you will be greedy for holidays."

"What should I do with them?"

"And can you be happy in that great silent house?"

"I have been almost happy in the Refuge."

"That is a good answer, Mary."

"I have no words to thank you for all you have done for me. You know something of what my life was before —before——" She faltered and stopped.

"Before you fell among thieves."

" You know that my father never loved me ; but you don't know what a lonely childhood, what a joyless girlhood I had. I have not to mourn over friends I have forfeited—for I never had any friends but a few cottagers, and their dogs, and our two Cornish maids, who were very kind to me ; perhaps because they saw how lonely I was. I loved the little fishing town, and the harbour where the bright-coloured boats lay at anchor in the sunshine, and the hills that rose up behind it, and the glorious sea. Those were the joys of my youth."

" Then I think you may be happy with my uncle. He is a good man, but not an amiable one. Who can expect a martyr to be amiable ? He is not a religious man, indeed I hardly dare call him a Christian—but he is a philosopher, and is incapable of an unjust or a mean thought." And then he told her that she must lose no time in providing herself with all things becoming to her new position. As she knew nothing of London shops, he would call for her on the following afternoon, and take her to Sparrow's Stores where his mother dealt, and where she could get almost everything that she wanted under one roof. She would want nice things for her toilet. She would want everything, he told her.

" You will have to live under a searching eye."

" Your uncle's ? "

" His housekeeper's. Mrs. Tredgold has grander ideas than her master. She is a clergyman's widow. Her husband had a living worth three hundred a year in a Lincolnshire village—but she takes rank from him as if he had been an Archbishop. You will have to hear all about his great mind, and how he vegetated in his dreary parish. If you listen quietly, and seem interested, Mrs. Tredgold will be kind to you. She has a terrible eye, a district visitor's eye, and she will scrutinize everything you wear——"

" And find fault with me ? "

" She will want to advise you, which may be worse. But you must bear with her, for she is an estimable woman after her kind. There are only a few such, created

to be housekeepers in the homes of the rich : women who delight in their office, and love to rule, and so take no thought for the morrow, and don't want to feather their own nests, at the expense of their employers. I don't believe the most insidious tradesman would attempt to bribe Mrs. Tredgold."

" I hope she is not an inquisitive person."

" Your own tact must protect you, if she bothers you with questions. You are going into the world now, Mary, and you must harden your heart, and take your stand bravely upon your own merits, and win friends for yourself in Warburton House, as you have done in the Refuge."

Mary sighed. She had lived among sinners, and the sinners had been easy to get on with. How would the saints treat her ? She had a shrinking fear of the saints, as represented by the Lincolnshire vicar's widow.

V

IT was a new and wonderful thing to walk about the leviathan premises of Sparrows, Limited, to go up in lifts, and to go down in other lifts, to move through halls of splendour, through millinery departments and boot-and-shoe departments and trunks and underlinens, stoves and laces, and that most dazzling of all departments, the Fancy goods, with a purse full of five-pound notes and sovereigns, which Austin Sedgwick had given her, after he had looked at cashmeres and silks, and helped her to choose such colours as please the educated eye. Having done that, he could leave her to do the rest of the shopping, and get back to the Refuge in a cab. There were thirty pounds in the purse, and she was to buy all the things she wanted.

Alas, she wanted everything, all the things she had never had, the nice things, and the pretty things, that for the daughter of prosperous parents are a matter of course, but which for the child of the man of letters, living on the fruits of his pen, had been out of the question. A hat now and then, when her father had received a twenty-pound cheque for three months' work, a frock now and then; but all these unconsidered trifles that make up the sum of a woman's dress, and are so much more costly than anyone would suppose, were impossible to Mary Smith. Doing without things had been perhaps the most useful part of her education; for what greater virtue can a woman have than self-denial. The consciousness of that purseful of money did not turn her head. She did not like taking Austin's money, but she told herself that she could repay him in quarterly instalments out of

her salary. She thought that Mr. Field would hardly give her less than forty pounds a year, and if so, she could pay her debt to Austin in less than a year, since she could want to buy nothing more for herself within that time.

She bought judiciously, and in her clear young brain there was always the knowledge of the amount she was spending in each department. She knew that wisdom lay in buying good things and not too many of them. Two frocks, one of fine cashmere, and one of mole-coloured cloth that was lustrous as satin, with a superior dress of soft silk, the pale grey that Austin had chosen for her, would last her a year, if she was careful. Her hats were of less importance, as Mr. Field would not see them, and here her selections were tasteful and discreet, and the little black hat and the little grey hat were neat and becoming, and what young women call "dainty." Everything in that modest trousseau was of the best quality, and almost Quaker-like simplicity. A girl who chose such things did not want to be stared at and admired in the street, nor to be at the top of to-day's fashion. Things so neutral had never been fashionable, and would not soon be *démodé*. It is the striking fashion of the year before last that marks the badly-dressed woman.

The two hours spent in leisurely shopping were very pleasant—even the solitary cup of tea at the little table in the nearly empty tea-room, which gave her time to look through her bills and make a pencil list of the amounts. Discreetly as she had bought, she had spent nearly all her money. There was just twenty-five shillings left, after she had paid for her tea—enough to buy an umbrella, and leave two shillings for her cab. She had spent all, but she felt that she had spent wisely. She need not be afraid to face the awful eye of Mrs. Tredgold, since she had not forgotten the essential necessity of a good basket trunk, large enough to hold all her belongings, a small dressing bag, and a Bible and prayer-book.

Mr. Sedgwick had telephoned to Mrs. Gurdon, so there was no astonishment at her long absence, nor at her return in a cab crammed with parcels. The kind matron

was delighted when she heard Mary's account of the fortune that had befallen her.

" I shall never forget your goodness to me, and how hard you tried to get me a situation. It was just a stroke of luck that Mr. Sedgwick has an eccentric uncle, who happened to be in want of a reader—for perhaps reading aloud is about the one thing I am likely to do best. Fate has been kind. If this gentleman were not an eccentric, he would never have taken me without a character—and what would have become of me? I couldn't go on eating the bread of charity. You and Mr. Sedgwick have been angels of kindness. But I could not have gone on. I should have had to drown myself."

Mrs. Gurdon remonstrated with her for this wicked speech.

" Oh, my dear, you are so clever," she said, " and you have read so many more books than I have. But you had better have read one Book with more diligence. I'm afraid you have never given your mind to that Book. I'm afraid you are wanting in the religious sense."

" I think I am," the girl answered with a deep sigh. " When I wanted God to help me He would not. If you had a friend, your dearest friend, whom you believed in as the soul of goodness, and if you went to him in a great trouble, and threw yourself at his feet, and implored him to help you—and he stood silent, and let you go out of his house without a word of comfort, would you ever again believe in that friend? "

" Oh, my dear, God is not like our poor human friends. His ways are past finding out."

" I don't think I shall ever find them."

" Was your father an unbeliever? "

" No. He believed in Plato, and in Omar Khayyám; the Rubáiyát was his gospel."

" Poor man! " sighed Mrs. Gurdon, who had never heard of the Rubáiyát, but had no doubt it was something dreadful.

Mary's new trunk was taken up to Mrs. Gurdon's private room, and all her packing was done there, so that the

other women should not be envious or unhappy at sight of all those pretty things. Mrs. Gurdon helped Mary to pack, and admired everything, and praised Mary's taste. The most useful of her frocks was to be sent home in three days, and by the end of the week Mary would be ready to enter Mr. Field's service.

She had to approach Warburton House this time, without the protection of her one kind friend; and her heart sank when the cab rattled across the courtyard and drew up in front of that stately Georgian door, the common four-wheeler, with her big trunk on the roof, and a number of cardboard boxes inside.

Two young men in livery and a superior person in a black coat handed her out of the cab. The cabman was paid and dismissed while she was opening her purse. She offered the money to the butler, who waved it away with a haughty movement of his superior hand. He said something to somebody through a speaking tube, and Mary heard a silken rustling that she knew by instinct as the forerunner of the housekeeper.

Yes, it was Mrs. Tredgold, eager to take possession of her—Mrs. Tredgold, tall, buxom, good-looking, with grey hair elaborately arranged under Honiton lace lappets. Her gown was the housekeeper's livery of black silk, but as unlike a housekeeper's gown as a superior *faiseuse* could make it. Mrs. Tredgold loved dress, and her salary allowed her to indulge herself.

"Miss Smith, I believe," she said, with a chilly smile, and with eyes that examined the newcomer as if they were scrutinizing a famous picture whose authenticity the owner of the eyes was prepared to dispute.

It was not easy to find fault with this human picture.

Mary stood firm as a rock, facing the unfriendly gaze. Tall, slender and graceful, a pale face under a neat crinoline hat, modestly trimmed with chiffon and lace, and without the suspicion of a feather, a plain cloth gown, perfectly fitting. Mary took Mrs. Tredgold by surprise.

"I will show you your rooms," she said. "Mr. Field wishes you to read to him after luncheon. But perhaps

you are not able to read after a meal. Some of his other girls used to be flushed and breathless, and annoyed him very much."

The contemptuous utterance of the words "other girls" was not pleasing to the newcomer.

"I have not found any difference," she said. "I am not accustomed to a substantial meal in the middle of the day. If I may have some biscuits or a little cake, and a glass of soda-water, I shall be able to read as soon as I am wanted."

She followed the housekeeper up a secondary stone staircase, quite as good as the usual London stairs, and along a passage on the second floor, till Mrs. Tredgold opened a door, and ushered her into a good-sized room, plainly furnished as a sitting-room.

"The windows look west, and you can see the tops of the trees in the park," she said almost graciously. "Mr. Field wished you to have nice rooms. The bedroom opens out of this. It is a very good room. I have done my best for you."

"Thank you. Mr. Field is very kind."

"He is always kind where he takes a liking, and I think he has taken a liking to you. His likings don't last long as a rule, but perhaps you are going to suit him, and I hope you will, for I am sick of failures, and strange faces, and young women who come from heaven knows where. You will have to bear with him, and you won't find your employment a bed of roses—in spite of the wealth, and the splendour, and the beauty of this house. You will have to remember what a sufferer he has been."

"How can I forget, seeing him there before my eyes?"

"Girls are so frivolous. They are always thinking of their good looks, or of their clothes, or of the last theatre they have been to."

"I am not likely to go to theatres, and I have not been brought up to think of my clothes."

"I see you don't go in for flashy hats and twopenny-halfpenny jewellery, which is a comfort. We have had girls in sham pearl necklaces, and as many beads as an Indian squaw."

Mrs. Tredgold had now become condescending and friendly, and insisted on showing Mary the amenities of her bedroom—the electric lamps over toilet-table and bed, the superior spring mattress, down pillows, and satin-covered quilt, the pretty dressing-table, and spacious wardrobe.

"I don't suppose you'll want all that room for your things," she said, with a little laugh, "but your frocks will last all the longer for not being crowded. Do let me help you unpack."

"No, thank you. I'll leave that till the evening."

"Hadn't you better take your frocks out at once? They will only get creased by being kept in your trunk."

Mary thought not.

The monotony of the housekeeper's life, in a house where there was so little company, had made her curious about trifles. She wanted to know more about this delicate-looking Miss Smith, whom Austin Sedgwick had brought on to the scene—Austin, a bachelor of eight-and-twenty. This young person was obviously superior to all the other young persons who had aspired to the post of reader, and Mrs. Tredgold felt there must be something wrong about her, some skeleton in the cupboard, some secret hidden behind those thoughtful grey eyes, which still held the shadow of a great sorrow.

Stimulated by curiosity, Mrs. Tredgold became friendly to officiousness. She was distressed that Miss Smith would not allow her to unpack for her, still more distressed that she preferred a biscuit and a glass of milk in her own room, to "fried soles and a boiled chicken and asparagus," with the housekeeper.

"You needn't suppose you would have to sit down with the upper servants," she said. "My table is distinct from theirs, and I keep myself completely aloof from them. Mr. Field's valet and house-steward have their own room and never enter the servants'-hall, where the rest of the household have their meals and spend their evenings: twenty-one in all, if I am to be included, twenty-one people to wait upon one old gentleman who sits all day in his wheelchair!"

Mrs. Tredgold's tone implied first, " Oh, the folly of it ! " and then, " Isn't it splendid ? "

Mary Smith very soon discovered that if the Lincolnshire vicar's widow was proud of her connection with the Anglican Church, she took a greater pride in the splendour of Warburton House, the luxuries and waste that go with a colossal income, the magnificence of her empire over twenty over-paid and over-fed servants. She could imagine nothing more dignified than such a position. If her husband had lived to achieve a mitre, than which nothing was more unlikely, her standing as a bishop's wife could hardly have given her more scope for arrogance ; while no episcopal palace in England could compare for luxury with Warburton House, any more than five thousand a year could compare with a hundred thousand.

Perhaps the luckiest day of Mrs. Tredgold's life was that on which Miss Field heard of her, as a clergyman's widow, of spotless character and superior culture, in want of a situation of responsibility and importance, but in no manner menial.

To Miss Field the widow must always look as the founder of her fortune, and in this humble friend Conway Field's eldest sister had an unfailing source of information about her brother's surroundings and associates.

Mary Smith went to Mr. Field's room at two o'clock and read to him till four.

" I'm afraid you may get weary of the books I shall want you to read," he said politely, as he pointed to the chair where she was to sit at a little distance from his own sad seat, with its wheels, and mechanical contrivances that told too plainly of his helpless condition. By their aid he could move himself about his rooms—making a tour of his pictures or his books, as inclination moved him—for though his valet was always within call, and was dextrous in helping him, this invalid of thirty years liked to help himself.

" I want to be sure that I am alive—to just that miserable extent," he told Austin, one morning after he had travelled round his library, and chosen his books for the

day. He had a bookstand near his chair, where he ranged the volumes it was his fancy to read or to look at, and which he exchanged for others when he tired of them. He was a desultory reader, turning from book to book, unable to concentrate himself long upon any subject, but reading the authors he loved over and over again, finding always something new, even in the book he had been reading for thirty years.

"Fielding and Thackeray are always new, just as Horace is," he told Austin; "books to open at random. Scott's novels and Boswell's Johnson I read once a year. Shakespeare is my daily food—and for history, well, that is inexhaustible. There is a Frenchman who has given his life to the fifteen years of the Revolution. Such microscopic historians, such relentless labourers deserve a sick man's gratitude. I owe the possibility of living to the men who have written books for me."

The book that was lying ready for the new reading girl was the second volume of Grote's Plato; rather a tough subject for the beginner, and Mary Smith could but think of Mr. Boffin's Gibbon, and Wegg's manœuvre for escaping difficulties.

"Please correct me, if I mispronounce the Greek names," she said shyly.

"Perhaps you have never heard of Plato."

"I used to read the Republic and the Phaedo to my father."

"Then you will feel at home with Grote."

There was a ribbon to mark the page where the last reading girl had been told to stop, at the end of the thirty-fifth chapter. Mary began the thirty-sixth, Timoeus and Kritias, and read on in her quiet voice without one indication of fatigue or inattention, till the clock struck four, when the butler brought his master's tea-tray, followed by the valet Ridley, who waited on his master while he sipped his tea and ate a little semi-transparent toast.

"You can bring another tray for Miss Smith," Mr. Field told the butler. The man was too well trained to express surprise by the faintest change of countenance,

but this was a new departure. Not one of those previous failures had ever been given tea in that room.

"This young person seems likely to catch on, ma'am," Mr. Drayson told Mrs. Tredgold, whom he happened to meet on his way to the still-room. "The governor has ordered tea for her in his room."

"I hope he is not going to put ideas in her head," Mrs. Tredgold replied severely.

"You have a good voice," Mr. Field said, as Mary finished the chapter, "and I believe you understand what you are reading."

"I dare not pretend to understand Plato, but I am interested in all I read of his."

"You will be more interested, as you read more. And now take your tea, and let me hear you talk. Tell me a little more about yourself."

"I have so little to tell."

"Then tell me about your father, if it doesn't hurt you to speak of him."

It was from the face which those keen eyes were reading that Conway Field knew there was pain in the story of the past, pain in the association of father and daughter.

"It hurts me to think that I was a cause of unhappiness to him," she answered sadly. "But that is a pain that will never cease. I would have loved him with all my heart and strength, if he had let me—and then perhaps things would have been different afterwards. I should have been stronger, better, if he had given me his love. But he could not. His heart was buried in my mother's grave. I tried to be useful to him—and all I could do was to read aloud to him, or to write at his dictation, when his sight began to fail."

"He made you a drudge; his unsalaried servant."

"No, no. He knew that I thought it a privilege to read the books he liked. It was my only education. He could not afford the expense of a governess for me, or to send me to a boarding school."

"Then you had no woman to take care of you."

"I had the two maids—good creatures."

" And for the rest, you ran wild, as people say."

" Yes," she answered, with a sudden lighting up of the pale face. " I ran wild. Oh, what a happy life it is to run wild on the Cornish hills, beside the Cornish sea."

" The sea that Hook used to paint. I have three of his best pictures in the next room."

" I saw them as I came through the room. I think I know the very spots where he painted them. Dear old man ! I have seen him sitting at his easel under a white umbrella, on the hill."

" Then your girlhood was neither dull nor unhappy ? "

" No, I was very happy. I think the lonely life suited me. I loved my father's quiet room, and his conversation when he cared to talk—for he talked beautifully. I didn't want girl friends or amusements. I was quite happy—till——"

" Till you fell among thieves," Conway Field said gravely, echoing Austin's words. " We won't think about that. If you will be my slave of the lamp, as you were your father's, I will try to make your life pleasant, if I cannot make it happy."

" I shall be quite happy, if I can read well enough to please you."

" You can read well enough. But I am a selfish old man and you must not let me impose upon you. Now I should like you to come back at eleven o'clock, and read Shakespeare to me for an hour. Would it tire you to read at that late hour ? "

" Not at all."

" From nine to eleven is the time when a friend sometimes drops in for a chat. He knows he will find me at home. Or if I am alone, I fall asleep over a newspaper—and then at eleven I am wide awake again, and it quiets my nerves to be read to for an hour before I go to bed."

" I will come at eleven," she answered gently, and left the room.

" She knows how to go out of a room," thought Conway Field, " which so few of her sex do."

VI

MARY dined with Mrs. Tredgold, whom she found in a curious mood, polite, but melancholy, and indisposed for conversation. The dinner was choice of its kind, and carefully served by a footman whose particular duty was to wait upon the lady-housekeeper. He was in a manner her servant.

Mary, who was a small eater, and had plenty of leisure during the five courses, could but see that this young man was puzzled by the great lady's manner, and looked at her furtively very often—when he handed the dishes.

He was indeed in the habit of being honoured by her conversation occasionally in the course of the attendance. She would ask him questions about his fellow-servants, and even accept scraps of information about the outside world—piquant details of the latest scandal in Mayfair—Mrs. A's card debts, or Mrs. B's divorce suit—or the terrible collapse of Mr. C's libel suit against a society paper. But to-night Mrs. Tredgold seemed unconscious of his existence till he was scraping the crumbs off the table-cloth.

"I believe it was Robert who took you your tea this afternoon in Mr. Field's room," she said to Mary. "I hope it was made to your liking, neither too strong nor too weak?"

"It was very nice."

"You would have had a more lively tea with me. Mr. Cobb, the senior curate at St. Michael's, dropped in—as he often does, and his conversation is quite delightful

—serious and yet gay—these fervent Christians have sometimes a playful vein. He has, and you lost something by not being with us."

"I may be more fortunate another time."

"Very likely. I don't suppose Mr. Field will often want you to take tea in his room. He has never done such a thing before—but he is full of whims."

"If he were well enough to talk, I should think his conversation would be as interesting as the curate's," Mary said quietly. "He must have read so much and thought so much in those sad years."

"Yes, he has a great mind—as my husband had: the mind of a scholar and a philosopher. But in Mr. Tredgold's case philosophy went along with deep-rooted faith. He was a churchman and a Christian—while Mr. Field, alas! is an infidel, and glories in his unbelief. Mr. Cobb has had a melancholy experience in his endeavours to bring that lost sheep back to the fold—but, though his efforts have so far been wasted, he will never take his hand from the plough till he leaves this parish, which will be a sad day for his congregation."

After this burst of speech Mrs. Tredgold relapsed into gloomy silence, trifled with some strawberries, took one glass of port, and then retired to her armchair, without further notice of Mary Smith, who took the hint, and wished her good-night.

"Are you going to bed at nine o'clock?"

"Oh, no, but I shall have plenty to do before eleven, when I am to go back to Mr. Field's room for an hour's reading."

"He will keep you up till two in the morning. He is frightfully restless at night. Ridley has an awful time with him."

"I don't mind how long I read, when the book is interesting. Good-night."

The housekeeper dismissed her with a nod—no offered hand, or kindly smile. Mary went up to her sitting-room with an uncomfortable feeling that Mrs. Tredgold was displeased with her. She had to remind herself that the

person whose humour she had to study was not the housekeeper, but the afflicted master of the house.

She spent an hour or two in unpacking and arranging her possessions in the roomy wardrobe, and at eleven o'clock she went down to the picture-gallery, where the reading girl sat alone in her white stillness.

The valet came out of Mr. Field's room as she stood for a moment by the statue.

"He is ready for you. He has been ready for some minutes." There was a reproachful emphasis in the last words, which meant that Mr. Ridley had ordered his supper for "eleven sharp."

He held the door open for her, and she went in, a shadowy figure in her pale grey frock, which she had put on for dinner.

Conway Field looked wan and tired in the lamplight. He pointed to a book on the table by which she had sat in the afternoon, and on which a shaded lamp had been placed for her.

"Read *As You Like It.*"

"From the beginning?"

"Yes."

She began to read very quietly, for the wan face, the tired voice, suggested mental and physical exhaustion; but she almost lost consciousness of the invalid, in the delight of what she was reading. The book itself was a joy, a thin imperial octavo bound in limp vellum, the type large, the hand-made paper exquisite. Such an edition of Shakespeare as she had never imagined. Only one play in a volume—the head-lines, the tail-pieces, the perfection of modern art.

She turned the leaves with delicate hands that were faintly tremulous.

"You touch my book as if you were afraid of it," Mr. Field said.

She had felt all the time that those weary eyes were watching her, but his speech brought the warm blood to her face.

"It is such a lovely book."

" My favourite edition. Printed at a press that exists no more, since the artist who created it is dead. *Tout casse, tout lasse, tout passe !* When you are as old as I am, you will have realized that dreary saying."

She went on reading till the valet came in at the stroke of twelve, and took his place silently by his master's chair. She had read the first Act and half the second when the clock struck.

" Good-night, Miss Smith. You read Shakespeare quite tolerably, and you will read better by and by. You shall read the comedies and the histories before you begin the great plays, and by that time you will be an accomplished Shakespearean reader. You have the material—intelligence and voice. Practice and thought will do the rest."

" You are very kind," she said, feeling that this was high praise, and then she saw the pale hand held out, and she was pleased when Mr. Field held her slim fingers in his own with a momentary pressure, which could hardly be called shaking hands. It was at least a more cordial good-night than Mrs. Tredgold had vouchsafed to her.

Two footmen came into the room as she left it, tall and vigorous youths, who placed themselves on each side of their master's chair ready to wheel him through the library to his bedroom.

Five spacious rooms, picture-gallery, morning room, library, bedroom and dressing-room, were devoted to the master's use—but that suite of splendid rooms was Conway Field's London world. He only left them for an airing in the Park on a sunny morning, until he was removed to his country house, or on a Continental journey, which only his wealth made possible. No man of small means as helpless as Conway Field could hope to forget his infirmity in the enchantment of far-off lands.

As the strangeness of this life wore off, Mary Smith had leisure to realize the change from the Refuge to Warburton House. She could but feel that her lines had been cast in pleasant places, and that this employment which Austin Sedgwick had found for her was just the

most congenial work a kindly Fate could have thrown in her way. Youth that had known only the bright side of life might have revolted against the monotony of her days and nights, the subjection of her own will to that of a querulous invalid ; for although Conway Field was kindly, he was often querulous, and always peremptory. Every inhabitant of Warburton House was there to do his pleasure, existed only to minister to him and obey. They were drilled into silent submission—never to question, never to wonder, above all, never to express compassion or sympathy—only to obey. They were not to " study him," or to guess what he wanted. They were always to await his bidding. By the time they had been half a year in his service, Mr. Field's servants would as soon have tried to guess the wishes of a tiger as to anticipate the requirements of their master.

" When I want you to do anything for me, I will tell you," he said ; and after they had heard that speech two or three times in a voice and with a frown that few men except the Great Commoner could command, Mr. Field's servants knew their places.

Among the few of his dependents who suited him there was a little man whom Mary saw every day. but with whom acquaintanceship never went beyond a few words of friendly greeting when she met him in the picture-gallery on his way to Mr. Field's room or leaving it.

This was the clever little shorthand writer and typist who conducted the invalid's correspondence, grappled with the daily burden of letters which is one of the disadvantages of wealth or the reputation of wealth.

Every morning brought the same pile of letters on the large silver tray, hardly one of which was of the faintest personal interest to the man to whom they were addressed —letters for the most part from total strangers : innumerable, hopelessly repetitive appeals for help from every kind of public charity, from churchmen of every colour, endless, far-reaching, from nearest St. Giles's to remotest Africa, and in the majority of cases with a certain justifi-

cation in the pitifulness of the call. And it was for Peter Frominger to consider all these appeals, and to bring the most worthy of them before his employer and receive instructions in an interview that was never to last more than half an hour.

It had been by a lucky chance that Frominger had found his place in Field's service. For to serve Conway Field successfully was to be safe from the fear of a penniless old age.

Conway's doctor, in the gossip of a morning visit when there was nothing in the patient's condition to talk about, had told him the story of a working engineer in a factory, a clever young man full of energy and inventiveness, who hoped to rise from the ranks some day by sheer force of mind and will-power, and whose life had been spoilt by an accident. Something had gone wrong in the machinery—some seemingly trivial detail—and Frominger's left arm had been caught in the iron teeth, and the active, eager young man had been changed into a helpless cripple with one half of his body paralysed.

He had spent the next year of his life in a hospital—the year that would have been full of hope, since he was to have been married to a girl he adored before the end of it. His sweetheart had been kind, and had come to him every week on the visiting day, every week for the first three months, and then her visits had grown rarer, and he had lain on his bed of pain, longing for her, only to be disappointed. And then she had missed more weeks, and had brought him a bunch of grapes, or a few flowers, by way of apology, but had seemed hurried and fluttered, and there had been little joy in seeing her—and then she sent him a long letter, a cruelly sensible letter, which did not break his heart, only because he had found out that she was a very shallow young person, and that her love was not worth having.

She had been thinking over their circumstances, she told him, and as there did not seem to be the slightest chance of his ever being able to make a home for her, she had decided to marry the manager in the grocery store

where her mother had dealt for many years, and had seen him rise to his present leading position in the firm.

This crushing letter had a curious effect on Frominger, and in less than a week he had left his bed, in defiance of the doctors, and was walking about the ward upon crutches.

The doctors never knew what put life into the paralysed limb, and made that move, in which motion had been pronounced impossible.

"It is the most remarkable case of Will-power that has come within my experience," the doctor said. "This young man refused to be beaten. Within a few months he was on his legs again. They were not very good legs, but he was able to walk—and though he has not recovered the use of his left hand, his right is worth two of any other man's. Within a year he has taught himself short-hand, and has made himself an expert typist—and now he is able to maintain himself. He gets enough work with his typewriter to keep him alive, and that is all he expects."

"Send him to me," Conway Field said. "I might find use for such a man."

He found such use as Frominger in his rosiest dreams of possible and impossible things had never pictured. Mr. Field liked him, and after three or four interviews he was installed in comfortable rooms on that upper floor where Mary had now become his neighbour. Her rooms were handsomer and more spacious, but Frominger's rooms were the most luxurious he had ever inhabited, and the work he had to do was work he liked.

All letters addressed to the master of Warburton House went through Frominger's hands, to be carefully sifted, and only his bankers knew the extent of Conway Field's benevolence. The half-hour which he spent with his employer every morning was a small part of Frominger's work. He spent many hours upon his task of investigation, and travelled to remote and obscure suburbs to verify piteous letters, and sometimes to find the most plausible descriptions of shabby-genteel sufferings utterly without foundation.

Frominger did his work *con amore*, and the professional begging-letter writer who got so much as ten shillings out of Mr. Field's purse was not yet born.

And when the day's work was done, Frominger, who had been made a member of the London Library, had his hours of ease in his comfortable sitting-room, where Mrs. Tredgold sometimes dropped in upon him for a friendly chat, to inquire if his meals were brought him as he liked, and perhaps to pump him just a little about the things he knew in his intimate relations with her master. But as he had opposed a dead wall of childlike stupidity against all such attempts, she had ceased the pumping process, and was content to give herself the pleasure of talking to an intelligent person of her own sentiments and ideas, and of the distinguished position she had enjoyed during the Reverend Tredgold's lifetime.

Mary, on the other hand, saw very little of Frominger, since she was never in the room during the time in which Conway Field became as much a man of business as it was in his nature to be, and dictated his letters to the head officials of " the Yard " from which his wealth sprung, as well as fixing the amounts of his benefactions.

Mr. Field had no occasion for stern looks with Mary Smith, who took the liberty of understanding him, but never offended by the faintest expression of sympathy with his affliction. For her he was as other men. She gave him no pitying sighs, no pathetic glances. She was ready to talk if he was inclined for conversation, she went quietly on with her reading if he was silent. She was as obedient as an automaton ; but she read as if she enjoyed reading to him, which he was quick to perceive.

His other reading girls had insisted upon being sorry for him, of asking if he was better, or if he had had a good night.

" I never have a good night," he snapped at the questioner, " and I never want to be reminded of my sleeplessness. Please begin to read, and don't exhaust your voice. You haven't any to spare."

They had read wretchedly, and had been officious and

forward, and had cried when he reproved them. This girl had fine manners, and read well.

"You have brought me a treasure," he told Austin, when they were alone together, and Austin was delighted.

"I thought she would do," he answered quietly, knowing that with his uncle very little was sometimes too much.

But there were some people in Warburton House, and some visitors there, who did not approve of Mary Smith. Mrs. Tredgold, for instance, was tortured with the pangs of jealousy. Her master had treated her as a lady, but he had not treated her as a friend. His brief conversations with her had never gone beyond their business relations. He gave her his instructions. He heard what she had to say about the servants or about the house, and there an end. She felt no nearer to him after twelve years of diligent service than she had been when she came to him as a stranger. And here was this pale-faced chit, this girl from nowhere, accepted as a friend, treated as if she were a favourite niece. She had her tea in Mr. Field's room every afternoon—it was an established thing. The little Paul Lameric teapot was now known in the pantry as Miss Smith's teapot, as Mr. Field insisted upon it being used for her. He liked to see that, and some choice Swansea china, on her tray. Mrs. Tredgold had told him it was a pity such choice things should be so used, and he had replied frowningly that he wanted exquisite things where he could see them, rather than in pantry cupboards. So Miss Smith's afternoon tea-tray was fit for a duchess, and butler, footman and housekeeper were alike jealous and resentful. Ridley, the valet, had more common sense and more humanity. He was not jealous. Years of skilled and faithful service had established his value. Whatever came about, he must be first in importance with his master. A Mary Smith, with a delicate prettiness, graceful movements and nice manners, was but the ornament of life, while he was the foundation upon which the house of life stood. His master could not do without him.

Mary Smith's life in that stately house was like a long voyage on a placid sea. It was a monotonous life—for the only difference in her days was the change from one book to another, or the number of hours that she spent in Mr. Field's room. He was capricious, and sometimes impatient of a favourite author for not being as good as he had believed him.

"I thought Ruskin was more convincing. Put the book back upon the shelf, and bring the fourth volume of Carlyle's 'Frederick'—wearisome stuff, but it may help me to half an hour's sleep. Can you see to read in this half light?"

"Yes, if I sit near the window."

"Don't go too far away. Your voice is soft and low, an excellent thing in woman."

"Shall I read louder?"

"No, for Heaven's sake. I can afford to lose the sense of the book, but a loud voice is torture."

As time went on, and Mr. Field found his reader willing and even anxious to read as long as he liked to hear her, in that still night season when the ticking of the clock in the library was a rhythmical accompaniment to the gentle voice, he allowed her to go on reading till the deep of night. He would lift his pale hand now and then to stop her, and would ask with real concern if she were tired, and her answer was always the same.

"I am never tired. Please send me away when my reading wearies you, but not till then. I wish I could read you to sleep."

"I doubt if you will ever do that—but you shorten my nights for me—and I get some comfortable sleep between five and seven—and till that comes I can lie awake, and think of what you have been reading."

She found that he knew most of the finest passages in her Shakespearean readings by heart, and could repeat them to himself dumbly in those hours of waking.

"Samuel Brandram had mastered twelve plays—but I am content to know some of the finest speeches and a scene here and there."

She breakfasted with Mrs. Tredgold at a punctua nine o'clock, though she would have preferred a tray in her own pleasant sitting-room to that lady's well-furnished board, where she rarely escaped without having to hear insinuations or questions which were obviously meant to make her uncomfortable. Forewarned by Austin Sedgwick, she had put on an armour of proof against all such attacks, and her serene countenance on such occasions exasperated the housekeeper.

" She is the most provoking young person I ever had to deal with," Mrs. Tredgold told her friend the butler, who had lived so long in that tranquil household, and had enjoyed so much leisure for improving his mind by reading the daily papers, that he was as nearly a gentleman as a butler can be.

" Yes, Mr. Drayson, the most provoking and impertinent —and sly—yes, sly as sly," concluded the housekeeper, who had learnt this convenient form of comparison from the great mind of her husband, who never used any other. He had been wont to bewail himself for being as " hot as hot," or as " cold as cold," or as " ill as ill."

" No doubt Smith is sly, madam. She has it in her looks," Mr. Drayson would reply in his bland, superior voice. " But there is nothing abnormal in that. It is the girl's nature. And if she suits the governor, as she seems to do——"

" Suit him ? She has wormed herself into his favour as no other girl has ever done. Not Florence Taylor, who had twice her good looks, or Lucy Green, who had more style."

" The governor doesn't want style or looks, madam. He wants a good reader, and this girl can read. I hear her when I take them their teas—and I know what good reading is. I told you that first afternoon that she would do."

" And she has had her tea in his room ever since. Never did he lower himself to that degree with any other reading girl ! "

" No, my dear madam, but, you see, he likes this girl,

and he didn't like the others. That's where it is, Mrs. Tredgold."

"Well, if you're satisfied, Mr. Drayson, I suppose I ought to be. But I saw through that girl before she had been in this house a quarter of an hour. Becky Sharp!"

"Becky——?"

"Sharp, that's what she is, and so you'll find after your master's funeral, when you hear his will read."

"I hope that's a long way off, Mrs. Tredgold. I don't want a better billet than Warburton House, and I don't think you would gain by any change of that kind—though no doubt there'd be legacies for all of us."

"Not if *she* stays, and has her tea in his room every day. That girl is an underminer, Mr. Drayson. She has it in her face."

"She won't undermine me, ma'am, if I know my value."

"We all know your value, but when you see your master's mind failing—as nobody can doubt it is—you may expect the worst."

This conversation occurred when Mary Smith had been half a year at Warburton House, and when every picture in the gallery, and most of the books in the library, seemed a part of her life. It was winter, and the *tête-à-tête* afternoon tea, which was so deeply resented by the housekeeper, seemed all the more intimate when taken in the rosy glow of the wood fire, in the warm dusk that soothed Mr. Field's nerves.

Mary enjoyed that tranquil hour in the red twilight, when Mr. Field was in a talking humour; for his talk was always interesting—literary, philosophical, even sentimental, the quintessence of the books upon which he had been living for thirty years, the books that had been his companions and his consolers, the only barrier between him and despair.

He was kind to her—irritable sometimes, with nerves on edge, often capricious and impatient; but always kind, kinder than her father had ever been, even when he was

beginning to be fond of her; yes, always kind, and his kindness was very sweet to her. The sound of his voice, the light touch of his delicate hand when he welcomed or took leave of her—his praise when her reading pleased him, his careful instruction when she read French, and he would make her repeat a word half a dozen times till her accent satisfied him—all were sweet.

She knew somehow that she had found the state of life that suited her, and she was almost happy. It was a monotonous, uneventful life, against which the spirit of youth in the average girl would have rebelled—but in Mary the spirit of youth was dead. She had been through deep waters.

She had been through deep waters, and she had not forgotten. In the smooth and tranquil hours of the day she had no time for painful memories. Her duties, although so light, were absorbing, now that so many of her hours were spent in Mr. Field's room. She thought of him and his hard fate—she thought of the strange inner life that he had revealed to her since he had given her his confidence so freely that talking to her had become almost like thinking aloud. In the day the present hour was enough, and she had no time to think of the past.

But at night memory held her. At night the Past became the Present—and she was the slave of bitter memories. It was as if some cruel monster held her by the arm, and said: "Look back, look back at the path you trod, and see the mistakes you made. See how, when the straight road lay before you, dull and grey, perhaps, but with the morning sun waiting for you at the end—see how you let yourself be led astray by your first tempter—see how you tottered and fell when a nobler girl would have stood firm. See how poor a creature you were in days when you thought yourself strong. Look back, look back! Read the book of the Past, look at the pictures in the book. Look, and see what a wretched creature you were."

Memory was pain, but she could not forget. And it

was in the dead of night, brain weary, and body weary after tossing herself from side to side upon her sleepless bed, that she lived over again the tragedy of her young life—lived it in every detail. She was at Port Jacob, in the place where she was born, the house and garden that meant home in the days when she could not conceive the possibility of any other place being home—when she felt herself a part of the house and the garden. She was born there and had been a child there, and had grown into a girl there, without change of scene, without new acquaintance, without friends new or old, and she had never revolted against the monotony of her life. The two rustic maid-servants pitied her for being always at Port Jacob, and talked of the splendours of Plymouth—the shops, the theatres, the music-hall. But she listened to them with a dreamy smile, and told them that she never wanted to leave home, unless she could go to Spain or Italy, and see the things she had read about until they seemed as familiar as the golden hillside in May, or the cliffs in June, flushed with the bloom of the sea-pink.

She was never impatient in those young years. She loved the sea and the hills and her garden, and the tasks of translation or grammar that her father set for her. He would give her half an hour of his morning to map out her studies for the day, and half an hour in the evening to find out what she had done, well or ill. And this was all the time he could spare for his only child's education, and he did not pretend that this was not too much for him. Yet there was never a more eager pupil, or a mind that more rapidly absorbed knowledge. The books which he gave her to read, the chapters of history or travel that he told her to make a synopsis of, were sometimes of the toughest, yet she rarely offended him by her failures. He would praise her for work well done, though as coldly as he would have praised a paid secretary. But if he approved she was content. She had grown up without love, and she had left off hoping to be loved. The two maids were kind, the Vicar's childless wife was interested in her, and often had her to tea when she was alone;

but she was not invited to the Vicarage tea-parties, for her father was looked upon with distrust, as a misanthrope and an infidel, who never went to church or subscribed to local charities. That he lived soberly and paid his bills punctually was in his favour, but that he was engaged in literary work counted against him, since he was suspected of writing for Radical papers.

Happy, careless days! She looked back and saw the colour of the sea that washes the dark red cliffs of North Cornwall, and hides broad stretches of golden sands and low rocks over which the clustering mussel-shells fling a mantle of royal purple—lovely sea, of changing emerald and azure, and of deep umber, where the seaweed shows through the clear water.

Mary had plenty of friends among the fisher-folk and their dogs. She was sure of a kindly welcome in their cottages, even when she went empty-handed just to inquire about a sick child, or a fading grandfather, and she had their dogs to keep her company in her rambles over the hills, or along the shore—so it mattered to her very little that except the Vicar and his wife there were no gentlefolks at Port Jacob.

There was no pain in the vision of those early days, and those were her good nights when she could fall asleep before the scene changed, sinking through slumberous seas of gently heaving water, into the felicity of placid sleep.

There were bad nights when sleep would not come, when her brain was awake and active till the morning light brought the new day, and the past became the present. Miserable nights when she lived over again all that was cruel in her young life—when she had to live through disillusion and shame, and all the sorrow of her eighteenth and nineteenth years. The end of her innocent joy in simple things came so quickly that she could count the days that changed her from child to woman.

"Open the door, Mary, and ask that poor wretch to come in," said her father, who was standing with his back to the fire, looking at the window through which he had caught sight of a man crouching outside under the slope

of the rustic veranda. The rain was streaming from the thatch and lashing the windows—a south-west wind, a day of pitiless rain, and a stormy sea. The house faced west, so the veranda was not much of a shelter; and Mary's father had finished his day's work, and was in a beneficent humour.

"Let him come in, Mary. It's inhuman to see him crouching out there."

He might have said: "Let in your evil genius; open the door to shame and sorrow." For the opening of that door was the beginning of the dark chapters in the book of Mary's life.

She opened the door, and said in a low, shy voice:

"My father wishes you to come in for shelter, till the storm is over."

The sound of distant thunder was in the air, and a flash lit up the man's face, as he came from under the veranda to the threshold where Mary was standing.

"You are very kind, and I shall be much obliged if you will give me shelter till the worst of it is over."

He pulled himself out of his long oilskin coat, left it hanging on a nail which his quick eye had seen under the veranda, and came in at the door from which Mary had withdrawn, leaving him to shut it behind him, as he came in, bareheaded, with his streaming cloth cap in his hand.

The room was hall and parlour—the largest room in the rambling old house. The ceiling was low, and the walls were lined with books. It was a sombre room, where the wood fire on the open hearth was the only bit of bright colour; and the master of the house was grey and grave, severe of aspect.

That made no difference to the wayfarer, who came towards the hearth with a beaming smile; and, as his face came out of the shadows, Mary standing shyly behind her father's high-backed armchair, knew that it was the handsomest face she had ever seen. It was not that the features were finely cut. It was the light in the eyes, the vivid life in the face that made it remarkable,

just as the man himself was remarkable in some indefinable manner.

He had a good deal to say about himself, and Mary's father listened and even seemed interested, which surprised her, as his general attitude was that of an impenetrable reserve. He had snubbed the Vicar, and had presented a stony front to the advances of the Curate, who wanted to bring him into the fold, and brought all his Oxford culture to the task. But to this stranger he was courteous, motioned him to the chair on the other side of the hearth, and let him tell his story, where he came from, and how he came to be there.

It was a far cry from the Argentine to North Cornwall, but that was where he had come from. It was the only place where he had a chance of making money, and he had done pretty well there. But he had worked too hard, and had been down with tropical fever, so as soon as he was about again he had put himself on board one of the Royal Mail steamers. The sea voyage had done wonders for him, and having landed at Plymouth, he had been so pleased to find himself on English soil, his mother's country, that he had set out on a walk round Cornwall. His long legs were in want of exercise after the ship, and the ramble by the sea-shore and along the cliffs, with nights spent in queer little inns, had been delightful—till the rain came—such rain as he had not expected to encounter out of the Tropics.

When the tea-tray was brought, the stranger rose to leave, but to Mary's surprise he was asked to stay, and she found herself pouring out tea for the first visitor of a year or more. It would seem as if her father preferred this wayfarer out of an unknown world to the people whose names and place in life he knew.

That was the beginning of Mary's story ; but the story, opening so quietly, began to glow with colour, and to travel along unknown lines with lightning speed, until she felt like Leonora, borne through the storm and darkness on the black horse, with her lover's strong arm holding her. It was love at first sight, Jack Rayner told her

when they met next day and strolled along the shore together, love swift as fate.

There were no subtle phases, no delicate gradations, no tremulous uncertainties, no thrilling, unexpected revelations. The strong arm held her, the rush of the wind and the thundering hoofs of the black horse never ceased. From that first sunlit hour when she let herself walk beside him along the golden path under the cliff, and let him slip his arm through hers, and hold her to his side, she had passed out of everyday life into a dream-world. No one had ever given her love. In the arid atmosphere of her home the word had never been spoken, and here, all at once, this fierce love came to her, romantic, impassioned, offering her the promise of a life's devotion. Even on that first day he made her tell him all her simple story, the solitary life, so friendless and grey. The man dominated her from the first. She tried to stand up against love that was all storm and stress. She had not been fed upon the novelists' fairy-tales of lovers that can adore and be silent. He told her that he had never known what love meant till he saw her face in the firelight ; and she remembered the thrill of wonder that ran through her brain as his face flashed out of the shadows. Yes, that was love at first sight. He was her master.

He told her the story of his boyhood and youth, a wandering existence, full of adventure in places where a man went with his life in his hand—where death might be swift and sudden, but where fortune's wheel was always turning. Bad luck to-day, good luck to-morrow.

She was to be his fairy princess, and go with him to the land of gold—Brazil, Peru, the Argentine. They were all golden lands. Wherever they went fortune should go with them. He had been reckless, extravagant, idle, or had worked by fits and starts, and squandered his gains as fast as he made them, but he had always made money. With her for his wife he would be a new man ; his whole being would be changed, his life would travel along a new road. He did not praise himself, but rather gloried in the idea that he had been a reprobate. Yet whatever

he said of himself charmed her. He was her master. She was carried along by the force of that strong personality, by the animal magnetism in the man.

He had found lodgings at a little inn under the hill, half a mile from Port Jacob, but he spent his days in rambling about. By sunlight or by moonshine, in fair or foul weather, he was always on the hills or by the sea, and wherever Mary went she met him.

Too soon she found that those long rambles, with his arm holding her, were hours in paradise—that nothing else in her day was life, only waiting, only yearning to be with him, only endless thought of him, and a living over again of their last hour together: of the passionate speech, the first kiss, which was an event, resisted with outraged modesty, and accepted in a fainting surrender of weakness to strength, a slave to a sultan; and all the kisses that came after, and were claimed as a right. He called her his flower—his white rose of Cornwall—his sea-nymph, his fairy princess. He had a new name for her every time they met, and the folly of it charmed her. She was as completely subjugated as if she had been his wife for years, and obeyed him as the slave obeys, without free-will or power of resistance.

There was to be no long courtship. He would see her father, and explain the necessity of an immediate marriage. His holiday was over. He was wanted in South America. His holiday had lasted too long, and the fate of desperate ventures depended on his return. Business in those countries was a gamble.

She did not think her father would let her marry a stranger, a man of whom he knew nothing; but the voice that could charm her answered every objection. Why not? He was young, ambitious and successful. There was a fortune to be made where he was going. Why not? He told her that he was always lucky. What but luck could have brought him to her door, driven there by the rain and the wind. The elements were on his side. The same wind that had taken him to the Argentine had driven him to her door.

"I am the kind of dare-devil that Fortune always favours," he told her. "And I am going to have you for my wife: you and no other, my white flower of the west."

It was evening, an August sunset. The tide was far out, and they were standing on the edge of the waves that were lapping the sand. The very sound of the water, the red light of the sun, were with her as she lay sleepless, with unresting brain, and lived again through the passion of the dead past.

He was holding her to his side, with that strong grasp that meant possession. She hardly knew how utterly she had surrendered, how hopelessly she had lost the power to think and act for herself. He would see her father to-morrow morning, before he began his literary work. She had told him all their hours and habits, and he knew that would be the convenient time. Half an hour's interview would settle everything; but she must be out of the way. She was to go for a walk on the cliff—their favourite footpath, to the wild field of gorse and heather—and he would find her there when the interview was over. She had no objection to offer. All seemed so simple and so easy. Her father cared so little for her. Things had dropped from his lips, when he was in money difficulties, that told her she was a burden—an unnecessary expense. Why should he stand in the way of her marriage? How unreasonable, how unjust if he were to object! What had he ever given her of his heart? He had suffered her. A little while ago, perhaps, she was beginning to hope that he was growing fond of her. He had been kinder. But now that she knew what love meant, she looked back and thought that to have expected affection from such a father was like hoping for warmth from an iceberg. He had never cared for her.

The morning was grey, but sultry, with a menace of thunder, and she seemed to have been walking a long time under the lowering sky, when her lover came up the footpath with long strides, swinging his stick, an embodiment of strength and courage, as he always seemed to her

He did not answer her tremulous question, but caught her in his arms, and strained her to his breast, and covered the pale face with kisses.

"You are mine, darling, all mine. The other half of my soul. Tell me, dear, are you my own?"

She whispered yes, thinking her father had consented, and that all was well.

No, he had refused. He had behaved abominably. He had been brutal, abusive, a foul-mouthed blackguard. She must never enter his house again. He was not fit to have a daughter. The lowest peasant girl in the country was too good to be subject to such a father. And then he told her that there was only one thing to be done, only one gateway into the Eden of happy love. She must trust her fate to him—go away with him at once—without entering her father's house, across the hill to the railway station, and thence to Plymouth. They would be married before the Registrar next morning. She refused—she made every possible objection—but he had an answer for everything. She need carry nothing away with her—nothing. She could buy all she needed in half an hour at one of the big shops in Plymouth. His pockets were full of gold. She was to think of nothing, and trouble herself about nothing.

"Consider the lilies," he said, smiling at her. "My lily shall never know care."

She was swept along in a whirl of confusion and hurry. The strong arm had been slipped through hers, and she moved across the heather as if she had been walking on air. The sun came out of the sullen clouds, and the world was warm. The muttering thunder-peals rolled farther and farther away. Before she had time to think they were at the solitary little station, waiting for the Plymouth train. She stood by his side on the platform, silent and full of fear. Thought was impossible. When had she ever been able to think, while that arm held her; so strong, yet so gentle in its strength?

The train crawled into the station, and she was lifted into an empty carriage. The train crawled out of the

station, and she was sitting with his arm round her, and her head upon his shoulder.

How vividly she remembered the journey—the innumerable stations, the junctions where they had to wait—and all his soothing words, and how he had dried her tears—made her brave—reckless almost as he was reckless, with the splendid daring that she admired.

Never before had she been subjected to a strong man's influence. Never had passion touched her. She knew nothing of the world. She had never been allowed to read novels. All the history of romantic love had been kept from her. His power over her was invincible—he could make her believe what he liked, he could make her do what he liked. She went as to an inevitable fate, and made no struggle against her destiny.

The slow train, the waiting at junctions, made the journey long. They came into Plymouth in the lamplight, and she saw the busy lighted town from the window of the fly into which he put her. He had given her tea at one of the junctions, where they had an hour to wait, but she had been too agitated to eat, only able just to sip the hot weak tea from the cup which he held to her lips. She had eaten nothing since eight o'clock that morning—thirteen hours. The lighted shops, the passing figures on the pavement dazzled her. She sank into a corner of the carriage, half fainting, while he went into a shop and bought things for her, and she was hardly conscious when he almost carried her into the glare of a gaslit hall. She had never been in an hotel—and this seemed full of light and noise, and men and women hurrying to and fro—a vision of confusion. There was no splendour, as of the new hotel that calls itself " Grand " or " Imperial." This house called itself " family and commercial," and was full of busy life. The coffee-room where her lover took her was crowded, every table occupied, except a small one in a corner where a waiter found room for them. The glare of light, the noise and the heat were intolerable. A plate of steaming soup was put before her, a cork flew from a bottle with the sound of a pistol shot, and bright

wine that danced and bubbled was poured into her glass. But she could neither eat the soup nor drink the wine, though he was so kind and gentle, and urged her to eat. The light and the heat and the noise bewildered her. She shrank farther and farther back into the angle of the wall, and presently, looking up from his soup, he saw that she had fainted. He carried her out of the room and upstairs, a chambermaid going before them—a comfortable-looking woman with whom he left her. "My wife's luggage is in the hall," he told the woman, and asked her to unpack the things, and look after his wife, who was upset by her long journey. She was to have tea, or whatever she felt able to take; and then he went back to his dinner.

VII

THEY were in London next day—there had been no marriage before the Plymouth Registrar. He had found that impossible—though it had seemed easy.

"I am not up in your mouldy English law," he said. "I shall know what to do on the other side of the Channel."

It was evening when they got to London, and all Mary saw was a labyrinth of streets in a hurried drive from Paddington to Charing Cross. When night fell, they were rushing past churches and factories, across a river, amidst noise and smoke, and presently they were flying through moonlit fields in a divine stillness. They were to be married in Paris next day. There would have been nothing gained by staying in London, as the marriage before the Registrar would be no more practicable there than at Plymouth. The same mouldy law would prevail.

"Paris is the City of Light, of free and joyous lives," he told her. "There we can do what we like."

She heard him as in a dream. All her life with him since they were walking side by side among the gorse and heather was a troubled dream. It was ages ago since the soft wind was blowing round her, the wind from the western sea. An abyss of time yawned between that lost life and this. He had always been her master from the day of his first kiss—but she had not known it. She knew now.

It had been sunset when they came into London. It was sunrise when she saw the walls of Paris, and the morning sun was shining on the long street where she sat

by his side in the light victoria, and looked and wondered at the strange city—different from London and Plymouth —vaster, brighter.

After that endless street from the great station to the heart of the city, they crossed the river by a bridge, where the day's traffic had begun though the sun was not high —then by a flower-market, then to a grave calm street where the houses seemed asleep, and under a stone archway to a door where they alighted.

"Le Bon Fénelon"—that was the name of the hotel. The house in its courtyard was somewhat sombre, but clean and respectable—much better than the noisy commercial house in Plymouth. The room where they had breakfast was quiet and dull, but the three windows looked into the courtyard, where the morning light had a something that suggested happiness—a sense of pleasantness that was stronger than her despair. The breakfast of coffee and rolls was the first meal that she had eaten with anything like appetite. He had made her take a little bowl of *bouillon* at the Calais station, but she had taken it only to please him—and the long sleepless hours in the train had been spent in agonizing thought.

Could she be happy—could she know a moment's peace? She who was lost and degraded? She who must for ever know herself fallen and unworthy? But he had won her—no matter how. She belonged to him now. All that she had ever been or could ever be—her past and her future—were his. His love was round her like an atmosphere of warmth and comfort. Again and again he had told her that she was not to think; she was not to be anxious about anything. All she had to do was to trust him; just to let the hours glide by, to believe that he could make her life sweet.

He watched her as she drank the *café au lait*, and ate one of those little rolls that are worth a journey to Paris. He told her that he was going to show her the most wonderful city in the world—the churches, the palaces, the houses, where every stone was history.

She turned from him with a heart-broken sigh. He

gave her sweet words and tender caresses—all that makes the prettiness of love; but no word of marriage—the marriage that was to be so easy in Paris, the marriage that alone could lift her out of the gulf of infamy—the blackness of despair. On the vital question, the only possible redress, he said nothing, till she looked up at him with frightened eyes, and asked falteringly:

"When are we to be married? Oh, Jack, answer me plainly—you said we were to be married here. Was that true?"

He had to tell her that it was not true. The marriage in France was more difficult than in England. In London it would only be a question of living in a certain parish, for a certain time, and then the marriage before the Registrar could be easy. And they would be in London again soon—and then—and then this frightened soul should be set at rest.

"Oh, love, let us be happy now—now that you are mine, and that life is sweet. Let us drink the cup of joy. What do we want in this world but to be together, sure of each other's love?"

They were alone in the quiet room, where the business of the day had not begun. He had drawn his chair close to hers—his arm was round her, and her weary head had sunk upon his breast, and was resting there as if it were her natural shelter. He was her master first, her lover afterwards. Her eyes were looking dreamily into the sunlit yard, the summer air was breathing round her, warm as his love. Thought was deadened, and life again seemed sweet. Was it that she accepted her slavery, and loved her sultan? All that happened was inevitable. Slow tears streamed down her pale cheeks, till she hid them on his breast. She lay in his arms motionless, as in a hypnotic sleep. He had told her not to think, and the power of thought was gone. He had told her to be happy, and conscience was dead.

They drove about Paris all that day looking at wonderful things. He showed her all that was best worth seeing—Notre Dame—the pictures in the Louvre. He bought

her beautiful clothes in the Rue de la Paix, spending his money with a splendid recklessness; telling her that he could earn another fortune when that was gone.

"All the world is my Yukon river," he said, laughing at her remonstrances.

They dined in the garden at the restaurant by the Cascade, and for the first time in her life she tasted wine that sparkled and danced in her glass—the wine that he had wanted her to drink in the hot, noisy room, where the lights spun round with the trouble of her brain, before her eyes closed in sudden darkness. Here there was neither the glare of gas nor harsh noises—only soft lamplight on tables decked with flowers, low voices and light laughter, and the moon high up in a purple sky shining through the trees that circled them.

He made her touch his glass with hers—a silver sound. "Our wedding bells," he whispered. "Oh, love, let us be happy in the first hours of our honeymoon."

It was a tactless speech, and stabbed her to the quick, but she did not reproach him.

On the next evening they were at Fontainebleau, dining under the same moon—almost at the full—a golden disc, in a cloudless heaven—but there was no sound of rushing waters, or light laughter. They were alone in a rustic garden, and their attendant was a stout homely person, the landlord of the homely inn. There were grander places where they might have stayed. Mary had seen the lighted windows, the tall white houses, as they drove from the station. But he had chosen this old-fashioned inn because it was cosy and retired, and near the Forest.

They spent the next day in the Forest, driving and walking. They spent a long day in the Château and gardens, and Mary fed the carp, and thought of Napoleon, sitting at the table in the little room they had just seen, signing his surrender of the world. And her eyes filled with tears as she thought of the Old Guard waiting in the courtyard to see their invincible Captain ride away into darkness—conquered and despairing. Napoleon had been the hero of her girlish dream. She remembered Lamar-

tine's story of that tragic farewell. The thought thrilled her.

They had more days at Fontainebleau—driving about to neighbouring villages—villages where young painters lived and worked—living " the simple life," with a dash of cognac and a flavour of the Boule Mich. It was all strange and new. She saw the young men painting in the sunlight—the open-air artists—the new school which had done away with everything that had counted as a merit in the past, and was to be greater than the old schools by and by, if one could believe the enthusiasts. She heard their joyous clamour of talk and song at the inn where they dined—and in her lover's constant companionship, through all this week of fine weather and changing scenes she had no time even for thought, much less for vain regret.

The weather changed in a night, and in the grey morning Mary saw rain falling steadily on the garden where they had breakfasted every day. This morning the meal was laid in a dull room, with pictured walls representing a stag hunt in the days of the great Henri, pictures that time had dulled and darkened, and where forms of horse and man, hound and stag were seen dimly—ghosts of the vanished past.

While they were sitting there silent and depressed, he told her suddenly that he had to desert her for a day or two. He had business in Paris, in the interest of the great commercial house in the Argentine. He had to interview financiers, engineers—important people, who might keep him waiting. It would be a long day's work.

Her heart sank at the thought of his leaving her. She tried to keep back her tears, tried to be brave, but broke down piteously, and implored him not to leave her, to let her go with him.

He took her in his arms, kissed away the tears, and soothed her with sweet words. Could she doubt that he hated leaving her, but it was necessary, and it might be only for a day. If possible, he would come back by the last train. She was to try to be happy in the comfortable

old inn where the landlady was a kind creature, and would take care of her. He knew the house, for he had been there three years ago—knew all about the people. If the day improved she could have a drive in the Forest, or she could go to the Château and dream away an hour or two in the rooms that were so full of the romance she loved. She could think of the royal lover and his exquisite Diane. "Never more lovely, never more fondly loved than my Mary."

And so he left her—tearful but submissive.

The last train did not bring him back—the first day lengthened to a second, the second to a third. He telegraphed twice a day—the language of love was full of variety—but the excuse for absence was always the same—business—serious interests at stake.

He came back at last, but only to take her away.

"I think we have used up Fontainebleau," he said. And she sighed heartbrokenly, wondering whether she could ever be as happy anywhere else—with that factitious happiness when conscience and memory had been lulled to sleep.

They stayed in Paris for a week—he engaged in his South American business most of the time, and she left alone, to think and suffer. Then they went to London by the night mail, where he had to leave her at the station hotel—oh, huge and dreary caravanserai for a lonely girl! —while he hunted for lodgings.

Then came the beginning of their settled life—married life, without the sanction of Church or State. He had told her that their marriage would be practicable in London, when they had been living there a fortnight, and on the fourteenth day she reminded him of this, and urged him to make her his wife. And then in the midst of kisses and endearing words, she sitting on his lap, with her arms round his neck, he told her the truth. He was a married man—separated from his wife, but not divorced. Indeed, he had no power to divorce the wife who had left him with his consent. They had parted because they hated each other, but she was a cold, hard,

calculating woman, who was never likely to take a false step that could land her in the divorce court. And then followed the specious argument—the old, old story.

Could they ever be more to each other than they were now? What could an entry in the registrar's book, or even the mumbo-jumbo of the marriage service in a church do to make them nearer and dearer? Love was enough. She had only to trust him and be happy.

He kissed the broad band of gold on the slender finger, the ring that he had bought for her on their first day in London—a detail that had not mattered at Fontainebleau. He swore upon that ring that she was his wedded wife, and that he would be her true and loyal husband till death. What more could she want? Not much more perhaps. Only peace of mind, conscience at rest, reconciliation with her father, only her self-respect, to be able to look other women in the face without being ashamed.

Looking back on the endless vista of days and nights spent in those Chelsea lodgings, it seemed to her that she must have lived in that dull grey street for the larger half of her life. She had lived there till every brick and stone, every detail of window and door in the long rows of houses, of one undeviating pattern, the shape of the lamp-posts, the number of the doorsteps, had eaten into the substance of her brain. Such a cold, grey, eminently respectable street, but a street to lie like lead upon one's spirits. Halfway from end to end there was a blackbird in a wicker cage, hanging above a kitchen window. She never passed the house without stopping to look down into the area, where the bird moved with restless wing and chirped feebly. He had forgotten that he once sang. Her heart ached for him, but he was the only spot of interest in the street, and it would have hurt her if he had disappeared.

She was in a state of health in which most women find life full of sorrow—sorrow without cause—depression, capriciousness, liking things to-day and hating them to-morrow; impatient, prone to tears—but there was cause enough for her sorrow, for as the long slow months crawled

by, and her ordeal was growing nearer, moving towards her like some black Juggernaut car, under which she must lie down and be crushed to death—best that it should be death—she was growing more and more afraid that the love that had wrapped her round like a flame, the love she had been told to trust in for all the happiness and comfort of her life was a thing of the past.

The fire had burnt out, the light was waning. He was kind still, gave her sweet words and kisses, and talked of the long future in which she was still to be dear, still his cherished one, his flower, his pearl of the western sea. When he came home late, and things had gone well with him in the city, he would take her on his knee and talk to her boastfully of his success, and the wonderful life that she was to have with him in the coming years.

"When you have got over all your troubles, and are my handsome girl once more, my white rose, my morning star."

He hardly troubled himself to pretend that in his eyes she was still beautiful. He kept up no fiction of admiring her now. When she told him her secret, with what trembling tears, he had not disguised his chagrin. It was a pity. He had to go back to the Argentine next year, and he meant her to have gone with him. She would have been a queen where he was going—all the men would have been at her feet. But now it was hopeless, impossible. Fettered with a nurse and a baby! Not to be thought of! Prosperous as everything was in that land of gold, it was a new civilization. Life was splendid, but had its rough side.

"You will have to stay here till I can come back to you," he said.

"Will the time be long?"

"Not if I can make it short: but that will depend upon luck."

He was looking his handsomest—so bold, so strong, with the fire of enterprise shining in eyes where the enlargement of the iris deepened steel-grey to black.

He was as handsome, as splendid as he had been when he had first walked with her along the edge of the sea,

when by his will-power, and the something electrical in his fierce strength, he had transformed her from innocent child to responsive woman. Never had there been girlhood more pure, less moved by romantic fancies, or premature passions. She might have been the "pale young curate's" ideal bride—had not fate thrown her into the arms of a man born to conquer.

Again and again since they had been companions he had told her how he had always been a winner—against all obstacles, against overwhelming odds he had always got what he wanted. And now he was playing a big game, perhaps the biggest venture of his life—and he stood to win—and she should have gone with him to the Argentine, and should have shared his triumph, but for this complication, this troublesome turn that things had taken.

This had been his tone when she told him her thrilling secret, and he never knew how, while she sobbed upon his shoulder with hidden face, his words had cut her like a knife.

Oh, the dreary days, the days of friendlessness and dull monotony, when she had walked alone in Battersea Park, walking there in all weathers, till she knew every tree and every bush, and sat disconsolate in the least frequented alleys, and heard the joyous voices of children, and the light footsteps of happy youth. There and on the Embankment all her afternoons were spent, walking too much for her diminished strength, walking as if she could walk away from sorrow.

She had no yearning for the creature that was to take its life from her. She had never been a lover of children. Though she had been kind and generous with her small means to the fisher people's babies, she had been fonder of their dogs. She did not realize the change that was to come in her life—the effect of that new presence. She felt nothing but the disgrace of her position, and the waning of her lover's love. He was seldom with her now, and he made a merit of coming home every night, when the exigencies of business, and the social engagements that

were a part of his business, made homecoming difficult. He came at midnight, or long after midnight, but the sound of the key turning in the lock, the knowledge that he was there, gave her no joy. She knew that he was tired of her. The fierce love had flamed and consumed her, and only the ashes were left—coldness on his part, on hers the cold of death.

She knew that her ordeal was near, for the doctor had told her so. The landlady was kind, but patronizing. It was she who engaged the doctor and the nurse. It was she who bought the layette and the cradle. All those pretty purchases which are the delight of happy mothers were left to a fussy stranger.

Her time of trial came early in a cold windy spring, after long and weary waiting. She suffered a martyrdom, and was kept in a state of semi-consciousness for hours before her son was born in that last dreadful hour of total insensibility. She woke as from a lurid dream, to see Rayner standing on one side of her bed and her doctor on the other, with another man, white-haired and elderly, a stranger. "It has been touch and go," she heard the doctor say. And then Jack Rayner leant over the bed and took her in his arms, and kissed her with the old passionate kisses of those days by the western sea. She had not come out of the land of dreams, and she thought it was summer again and they were on the sands, and the lamplight on her face was sunshine.

Then she heard a faint strange cry, a cry that she had never heard before.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Your son—such a fine little fellow!"

She did not ask to see him. She hardly gave him another thought. She had been too near death, and for days and nights she lay in a state of such weakness that the things of this world seemed to matter very little. Day and night followed quickly—for her sleep was almost stupor. Rayner was sometimes there, sitting in an arm-chair near her bed, and he was tender and caressing as in those sunlit days at Fontainebleau. And then there

were long intervals, everlasting nights and slow-coming dawn, when she was alone with the nurse.

It was a long time before she wanted to lift her head from the pillow—a long time before she remembered that she had a son, and asked to see him. But at last the day came when the faint strange cry awakened a new yearning, and she asked for her baby. She was just able to sit up in bed, supported by a heap of pillows, just able to take the frail scrap of humanity in her arms, and scrutinize the tiny features, and gaze and wonder—Jack's son—so small, so fragile. Could Jack Rayner have such a son? Would this poor morsel live and grow into a man, and be another Jack Rayner in years to come when she had long been dead? In her extremity of weakness she never thought of herself as likely to recover and leave the bed where she had been lying for what seemed immeasurable time.

Her recovery was very slow, and the grey-haired specialist who had been summoned hastily when her life trembled in the balance came more than once before she was able to leave her bed. He had never seen such a slow recovery. But this poor young lady was altogether abnormal, fragile and exquisite, like a choice piece of china.

"How old were you when you were married, dear lady?" he asked her one day; and when her cheeks flamed at the question, he knew that his suspicions were correct.

"Seventeen and a half."

"Too young for the cares and the trials of matrimony. Never mind. We are going to make you strong and well. Your son is a fine little fellow, small, but beautifully made. And he will be a comfort to you."

She sighed—sunk in a pit of depression. The changeless days—the old four-post bed, with its dark moreen curtains, the unlovely furniture, filled her with unutterable gloom. The days changed to night before she had left off looking for the sun, and the nights were interminable. She saw very little of Rayner now. The armchair by the bed was always empty. This tedious recovery had tired him out.

Sometimes in the dead of night she would awake from a troubled dream and see him standing by the bed, and he would stoop over her and kiss her, and call her by the old fond, foolish names of his love-making. But he never stayed long. He excused himself for not being with her in the day—that big game that he and a good many other gamblers were playing was absorbing him more and more. It was colossal—there were great chances, great risks. He was on the way to become one of the financiers of the world. But the road was difficult, and even dangerous. What of that? Jack Rayner was at the head and front of the battle—Jack who had never feared the face of man.

He would talk to her like that in the dead of night, and his face and his voice, the magnetism of the man thrilled her, and seemed to give her strength. She would fall into a sounder sleep after he left her, and her dreams glowed with a strange warmth, confused visions of success and splendour.

At last came the time when she was able to sit in the armchair by the fire with her baby on her lap, and then her new life began—the pure and happy life—the new love that filled her life—the active love, utterly different from the passive love that had seemed a mere helpless yielding to the man's passion—the mere acceptance of caresses which brought bewilderment rather than bliss, the blind surrender of girlhood to the first lover. This was the love that can do as well as suffer—the love that can go through fire and water.

She worshipped this morsel of humanity, this soft dimpled thing that nestled on her bosom, this creature with eyes like stars, and a mouth like an opening rose. It was exquisite, it was all she could imagine of beauty and sweetness.

"Didn't I tell you," said the landlady, who came every day to see "my baby," presuming on her services in providing for his comfort—"didn't I tell you that they bring love with them?"

Yes. He had brought love with him from heaven whence he had come. Only among God's angels could there be a creature so sweet and so divine!

" And now I suppose you'll be engaging an experienced nurse for him," said Mrs. Baker, " and that will mean that you'll want my second floor for day and night nurseries. Luckily it will be empty after Midsummer, for the Pycrofts are going to furnish a flat."

A nurse? No, she would have no nurse. She was going to nurse him herself. She would give her darling to no stranger's care.

Mrs. Baker and Mrs. Lapp, the monthly nurse, both protested and argued. She nurse her baby! She wash and dress and look after him night and day, and see him through his teething, and wheel his perambulator! No gentleman's wife could do such work. They talked till they gave her a headache. They brought Rayner upon her next day, and then the doctor. Everyone lectured her, and told her the thing was impossible. But she stood like a rock. Mrs. Lapp would teach her. She had learnt a good deal already. She meant to nurse him.

" Darling! You are my baby, nobody else's," she said, hugging her cherished morsel, and he made a gurgling noise that sounded like assent. He was hers, all hers. Nobody else should have anything to do with him.

Everything yielded to her indomitable resolve. " Love will teach me the way," she whispered to herself; but she was humble and meek with Mrs. Lapp, and that self-assertive adept found her quick to learn.

" If more mothers was like you, babies would have a better time," she said. " They all think they're going to be good nurses, but they won't take the trouble to learn. I've nursed in small houses, where the father has been a clerk in the City with three hundred a year, and his lady would tell him the baby would make no difference, as she was going to be nurse. But it has always ended in a girl—a girl of twelve or thirteen that would leave the pram on a doorstep while she played hop-scotch. You'll be better than that kind of girl, at any rate."

She had her way, and at two months old the baby became her very own. Her health was re-established, and

the monthly nurse was dismissed, and from this time she lived for her child. Rayner might go or stay as he pleased. She was too busy with her infant to be concerned about his absence, whether it was a question of hours or of days. He had to be in Paris for nearly a month. It was always a matter of necessity. He had to be in Brussels for a fortnight. She asked no questions. Sometimes when he was in high spirits, and had dined well, he liked to talk about his affairs, and would tell her of the companies that were being launched, of which he was the moving spirit, of the capital that was rolling in, and the marvellous things that were to be done in that land of Ophir between the two great seas.

She listened and was interested, because he talked well, and his face lighted and his eyes flashed, and there was romance in his talk—a kind of wild eloquence that could charm her even now when love had waned.

"You don't understand the working of it all," he said, rather disgusted at her inability to enter into business details or to realize the chances of adventurous finance. "You have no head for figures. Never mind, Molly, I shall make you a rich woman in spite of yourself—and in the meantime I should like to see you dress a little better than a nursemaid."

And he threw a handful of gold into her lap. This was his idea of being kind. He was tired of her talk about her baby. He took very little notice of the child. She knew that he did not care, as she cared, though he swore that he loved the creature for her sake.

As time went on, she could see that he was bored when she talked of her darling; yet how could a mother help talking about the being that had filled her life with joy?

Battersea Park was no longer an arid waste; the trees were green, the sky was blue, the rippling water flashed and sparkled. It was the garden of Armida. She walked there behind her baby's carriage as in a place of enchantment. His heavenly smiles, his little cooing noises made her heart leap with gladness. She was never weary of wheeling him about those prim avenues where the spring

foliage grew and expanded as he did, as if they flourished in unison. Now the lilacs were in bloom, and he was beginning to "take notice," that delightful awakening of consciousness for which she had been watching. He waved his hands and pointed to moving things. He laughed as a bird fluttered across the path. His mind had begun to act by outward signs and movements, that mind which Mary had seen even in his earliest smile—the smile that only mothers can read. When the hawthorns filled the park with whiteness and perfume he was taking more and more notice. He was almost talking. All her days were happy, except those days of ceaseless rain when there were no long hours in the open air for her darling, no birds or flowers to amuse him, no boats moving on blue water, no children or dogs or horses. Only toys that he was soon tired of, because they were not alive. She walked about the room with him, carrying him till she was ready to drop, for he was no longer a fragile scrap of humanity, but a fine large child, who bore the stamp of his father's splendid physique.

Everyone in the house praised and admired him—the new lodgers on the second floor, the landlady, and the parlourmaid, even the charwoman. He seemed to grow in strength and beauty every day. He had lived through that hard winter when Rayner came from Paris with an account of a frozen river and boulevards piled with snow. He was eighteen months old, and he had never been seriously ill. His teething so far had been without difficulty. He was full of the joy of life, growing, thriving, and now his father admired him, played with him, tossed him in the air, and frightened Mary by the vigour of his play.

And then the life that had been all sunshine and joy changed suddenly, and all the world was dark. Heaven was iron, a heaven where there was no one to hear the cry of a mother's despair. A horror came down upon the room where the boy was lying. He was dangerously ill. He was worse. He was dying. It had been the illness of a week, but with terrible fluctuations, between hope and fear. The week had seemed an eternity of pain. But

now, looking back, she saw all that slow torture at once, as it were in one moment of agony, and the days and nights seemed to have rushed by like a tornado, a fatal destroying wind carrying joy and love and hope away for ever.

When they had laid the little white and silver coffin among the great company of the dead, Mary went back into the world of living creatures like a dead woman. For the rest of that year she moved and spoke like an automaton. She cared for nothing, she wanted nothing. Her heart was lying in Brompton Cemetery, where she went every day to look at the grave.

Jack Rayner had begun by being very sorry for her, but after a month or two he told her frankly that he was bored beyond endurance. Once when she reproached him for long weeks of desertion, he said:

"My dear girl, can you expect a man to come home very regularly to a fountain of tears? You hug your grief too long. When your boy was alive you made an idol of him, and I was nowhere. Now he is dead the case is worse."

It was not long after this speech of his that a letter was brought her late at night by a special messenger, a letter in a large thick envelope with a big seal, a letter from Rayner, stuffed with bank-notes.

"My Darling,—I have to cut and run. I shall be at Liverpool when you get this, on my way to the Argentine. Things are too hot for me in the City. I am paying for having allowed myself to be associated with fools. Don't fret, dear, and don't be frightened whatever you may see in the papers about me. I shall go under for a bit, but I shall come up again, and shall be on the crest of the wave before long. Remember I have always been a winner. I can't fail. I send you fifty quid. Make it last as long as you can. I hope you will hear from me with a fresh supply before it is gone.

"Yours till death,

"Jack."

She was so steeped in sorrow that this blow hardly touched her. Nothing mattered.

She told the landlady that her husband had gone to South America. The woman had been reading the paper, and knew why he had left in such a hurry.

"There's been a lot of hanky-panky going on, and your gentleman seems to have been mixed up in it," she said, "and now it's all come out. I hope he has left you provided for till he comes back—if come back he ever does."

Mrs. Baker was not a favourable specimen of her class. She kept her house clean, and she was a good cook; but a warm-hearted sloven would have been better in the day of desolation. Mary took no notice of her insolent speech. Such pin-pricks cannot hurt a broken heart.

And now the slow dull days went on, and Battersea Park knew Mary's footsteps again, heavy and languid footsteps now, for it was here she came to nurse her grief. Every curve of the gravel walk, every narrow vista where the path dwindled to a point, every distant gleam of blue water between green branches, every sparrow that hopped across her path recalled the joyous image of her child. He had noticed everything, he had been glad about everything, he had filled her life with sweetness: and he was gone! She would walk from the park to the cemetery, a long weary walk, and stand beside his grave. She had spent two of Rayner's ten-pound notes on a marble slab that bore her son's name: "Here lies Johnnie, aged eighteen months. And the heart of his mother."

The chaplain had disapproved of the fantastic epitaph, but seeing the mother's haggard face, and a look of despair not common to young faces, he had allowed the inscription to stand.

The days went on, and Mary knew no change of time or place. All things were equally indifferent to her. She had done with life. She came to the last bank-note, and then there followed an interval in which her landlady asked the same question every morning, with an angry crescendo. Had she heard from Mr. Rayner? Had he sent her any

money? A question repeated till the day when she was told she must find a home elsewhere.

"Very good. I will pack my trunks this morning."

"Pack! Not a scrap of property do you take out of this house till I'm paid my rent, and the money I've laid out for you in the last fortnight."

Mary seemed hardly to care, though the boxes thus impounded contained property of some value; all the pretty things that Rayner had bought for her in his flushes of luck and fits of generosity: trinkets, furs, laces—silk gowns and velvet coats—things he had brought her from Paris and from Brussels. Mary made no struggle against injustice, but went out of the house meekly, to the landlady's astonishment. She did not know what it was to wander about the streets of a great city—houseless and hungry. Then came that night of horror, which only Austin Sedgwick knew of—the last picture in these visions of the past that haunted her nights of waking.

Strange—after the interminable night of thought and memory, the horror of unknown pavements and aching feet, and gruff policemen who would not let her sit in a corner and sleep—strange when the new sun lit up the sober comfort of her spacious bedroom, and the trim housemaid with the morning tea, strange to realize that she had done with poverty and shame, and that the master of this stately house was something more than her employer, that he was her generous and considerate friend, kinder to her than ever her father had been, the employer who told her that he could not do without her. She had made herself necessary to his comfort. "She had got the length of his foot," as Mrs. Tredgold told Mr. Drayson, with a form of speech unworthy of so dignified a person.

VIII

AUSTIN SEDGWICK'S only personal indulgence, the only expensive pleasure he permitted himself, was Alpine climbing. He had enjoyed that luxury every summer since he left Oxford, and his cousin George Bertram was the chosen companion in this amusement. George had no office under government to dictate times and seasons. For several years he had been able to climb when he liked, and where he liked, run any risks he liked, and spend as much money as he liked. Of late he had ceased to be one of the unemployed, though not forced to work, being an only child, with a father whose success at the Bar had begun early, and had been increasing with his years, and an adoring mother, whose fortune was treated as pin-money to spend or waste as she pleased. George had been in far-off regions, as mountaineer and wild-beast slayer, and dearly as he loved Switzerland and the first hills that he had known, he was sometimes slightly disgusted with the Matterhorn because it was not Chimborazo, and inclined to find fault with Monte Rosa for its marked inferiority to Cotopaxi.

Austin did not sigh for fresh worlds to conquer, and was content with the Matterhorn, regretting only the march of progress which made that stern peak accessible to the ruck of mountaineers. The month or six weeks that he was able to spend in the high Alps with his cousin was the glory of his year, and the affection which these two young men had for each other, cultivated summer after summer in snowy solitudes, was almost romantic, and afforded material for scornful laughter in Austin's sisters, who did not like George.

In this particular September Austin found the maternal welcome less warm than usual, when he presented himself, sunburnt and joyous, in the Eaton Square drawing-room.

His two sisters brought him tea and buns with an openly vindictive air.

"Is there anything the matter, mother?" he asked. "You all look glum."

"I'm afraid we all feel glum," Mrs. Sedgwick answered, with more than usual alertness and decision. "Yes, Austin, there is a good deal the matter. Your protégée is the matter."

"My protégée?"

"Oh, you know whom I mean. You can't have many of them—certainly not many as clever as Mary Smith."

"Oh, is that the grievance? What has Mary Smith done in the last six weeks? She had been behaving very well when I last saw my uncle."

"Oh, her behaviour has been perfect," Clementina burst in excitedly. "She is a paragon; and I suppose if you don't mind, nobody else need complain. We never expected much. But for you to bring such a creature into that foolish old man's house was suicidal. You and George Bertram were neck and neck in the running, and now you may both consider yourselves scratched."

"You are talking rank nonsense, Tiny. Because my uncle is kind to this girl, and likes her better than any of his former readers—and you and my mother know what *your* protégées were—do you suppose that he will be cajoled into leaving her his fortune?"

"Yes, I do suppose! I do more, I foresee the thing as inevitable."

"You are a fool."

"I have been out five years, and I know something of the world. I knew more than you do before I left the schoolroom."

"Mother, I beg you to drop this absurd idea," Austin said seriously, ignoring Clementina. "Your brother is no weakling."

"He has never been weak about me or my daughters.

But I thought he was fond of you, and that you would come in for half his fortune, if not the larger part. He was fonder of you than even of George."

"And as for all the rest of us, we are dirt!" snapped Julia, who thought she ought to be heard, or might as well be in the schoolroom. Julia was not out yet, but she was in a kind of middle-state, having done with her governess and being allowed to appear at insignificant tea-parties.

"Neither George nor I have ever counted on being rich that way," Austin said indignantly.

He had always hated the talk of his uncle's money, which had been ding-donged into his ears ever since he could remember. And now he had to sit and hear back-stairs gossip about Mary Smith. Mrs. Tredgold had called one afternoon and had been given tea in his mother's boudoir, a *tête-à-tête* tea, in which the talk had been mostly about Miss Smith, things being related that Mrs. Sedgwick ought to know concerning this young person's artfulness, and Mr. Field's infatuation. The case was getting worse every day. His last whim was to have her walk beside his bath-chair—a thing no other reading girl had ever done. He could hardly bear her out of his sight. She had her tea with him, she sat with him at his luncheon, she was with him in the afternoon, and in the evening. And more than once when he was ailing and sleepless she had sat up with him all night.

"It isn't as if she were a trained nurse!" Mrs. Sedgwick moaned. "If she were a trained nurse there'd be no danger in it."

"Why not?" Austin asked. "Trained nurses are human, and rich men have left money to them before now."

"No trained nurse would be as dangerous as this girl. She is the counterpart of Becky Sharp—and if she hasn't green eyes, they look green in the firelight."

"She is no beauty," said Julia.

"No," assented Clementina. "Nobody would ever call her that. But it is just those pale, insignificant creatures who get round old men. Of course, from the hour she entered that house she meant him to leave her

his fortune. She couldn't see such a house and not mean it, being what she is."

"And you talk of her like this, knowing absolutely nothing about her," exclaimed her brother. "It is abominable!"

"No doubt you know a great deal more. But that you, with your expectations, could have been such a fool as to introduce that creature into Warburton House is enough to drive your mother and sisters distracted."

"If you had been living at home, the thing could never have happened," wailed his parent, who was sunk in the depth of despair, with her cup of tea in front of her, cold and untasted.

"Aunt G. was here yesterday, and you'll soon hear what she thinks of it."

"I am absolutely indifferent to my Aunt G.'s opinion. I happened to find this girl—a good girl, and absolutely friendless—educated and refined, and in want of employment—just the kind of girl to suit my uncle's whims and fancies. And I seized the opportunity. You and my aunts had all had your chance of finding the right person, and you had all found the wrong person, having tried to provide a berth for one of your own hangers-on. You had sent my uncle the younger sister of Julia's governess—a hopeless failure. Aunt G. had tried to plant her pet parson's daughter. You had all your axe to grind, and now you are angry with me because having no ulterior motive I have succeeded where you failed."

"You are simply impossible!" said Clementina, with grave displeasure. "Altruism may be a virtue, but it is a poor substitute for family affection. If you had any regard for your mother and sisters, you would consider it your duty to keep your footing as Uncle Field's favourite nephew and natural heir."

"I have never thought of myself as his heir."

"You must have known till this adventuress came on the scene that you and George stood to win. I don't know what George will think when he finds your protégée installed."

"Oh, drop it!" cried Austin, in what, from so courteous a person, seemed a burst of fury. "Protégée, protégée! I begin to hate the word."

"You'll hate it worse before you've done, unless you are in love with the girl, and mean to marry her."

Austin had taken up his hat and moved towards the door. He, who never left that room without a loving adieu to his mother, was going away in silence.

"Austin!" she screamed, before he reached the threshold.

He turned and looked at her gravely.

"You and my sisters have insulted me," he said. "You must give me time to forget this afternoon's conversation before I come here again."

They stared at each other in consternation when they heard him shut the street door.

"The worm has turned!" said Julia.

IX

MRS. TREDGOLD was on friendly terms with all her employer's family. Being often reminded of her late husband's holy office, they affected to treat her as their equal, but it was equality tempered with patronage ; and she knew that they did not forget that she took wages from the head of their house. The sisters might receive her with urbanity, and hob-and-nob with her over a silver tea-tray in their mother's boudoir ; but they would no more have thought of asking her to one of their tea-parties than of inviting the baker's wife or the cook's aunt.

They condescended, because they wanted backstairs information, and Mrs. Tredgold was too fond of talking about her grievances to withhold any information about the extraordinary goings-on at Warburton House.

There was one recurrent phrase which served as her excuse for every failure in loyalty to her employer.

" If you were not that dear gentleman's sister, I should never think of talking so freely about him, but these are things you ought to know, ' my dear Miss Field,' " or " my dear Mrs. Sedgwick," or " my dear Mrs. Bertram," as the case might be.

It was after a friendly cup of tea with " that excellent Tredgold " that Miss Field bore down upon her brother, in the clear light of a late September afternoon, and discovered him stretched upon his sofa, with a black poodle lying at his feet, and Mary Smith sitting a little way off reading Carlyle's " French Revolution."

Miss Field was best described by her brother as a por-

tentous person. She had been handsome in youth, and was handsome still in her aquiline way, with strongly marked eyebrows, and heavy bands of dark-brown hair parted in the middle of her spacious forehead. She reminded her acquaintance of Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine —with a faint suggestion of dagger or bowl. She bought her clothes from a fashionable dress-maker, and paid high prices for silks that rustled more than other people's. But she had a mid-Victorian stamp that no Parisian talent could mitigate.

She deposited a tepid kiss upon her brother's forehead, and seated herself in the largest armchair with the air of a guest who has come to stay.

"It is ages since we have seen each other," she said, "and I'm glad I find you alone, as I have worlds to say."

Her fine eyes swept round the room, and swept over the spot where Mary Smith sat, as if she saw nothing there.

"I am not alone, but I am ready to hear your worlds of talk. I suppose that means all you can tell me about the unspeakable bores you met at Buxton, or Matlock. Which was it, by the way?"

"Neither. I was at Harrogate, and the place was full of charming people."

"With footmen and motor-cars? Yes, I know."

"The Duchess of Dumfries was there, and you know she and I have always been fond of each other—and there was Lady Camplehay, and dear old Lord Ludgershall."

"And a commoner or two to give a flavour of humanity to the atmosphere?"

"Do you suppose my particular friends are not human?"

"No, my dear—they are superhuman—you talk of them with bated breath. You could not be more respectful if they were family ghosts."

"I own to a peculiar regard for poor dear Ludgershall. The seventeenth Baron, and the last of that historical line."

"'The tenth transmitter of a foolish face.' Poor Lud

has failed in his duty, and has not transmitted the family chin—or want of chin ! "

" You always show the cloven foot when I talk of my friends. I don't know where you got your radical opinions."

" In a general spirit of revolt against existing things."

" No wonder, if you let yourself listen to Carlyle's raving against everything aristocratic and lovely."

" I rather like his raving. We were at a thrilling page when you came in—waiting for Philip Égalité's vote."

Guinevere remained in a stately silence until the poodle jumped off the sofa, and came to investigate her silken skirt, perhaps to discover if she was a poodle-owner.

" I see you have a dog," she said. " Is not that a new departure ? "

" Yes. The first since Bran died. He is rather a superior thing in poodles, and has won prizes at half a dozen dog shows, but I have not begun to love him yet. I bought him to amuse Mary."

This time Miss Field was startled into looking at the reading girl, and looked long and searchingly.

The slender figure, the pale refined face, the grave grey eyes with dark lashes and arched brows, the soft silk gown, and delicate lace *guimpe,* the *tout-ensemble,* took her breath away.

The aspect of things realized the worst that Mrs. Tredgold had hinted at.

" As we have not seen each other for nearly two months, and may be supposed to have a good deal to talk about, perhaps Miss—Miss——"

Mr. Field's eldest sister stopped suddenly, with a withering glance at the reader, who had risen and moved towards the door.

" You can amuse yourself with Zamiel in the next room, Mary, for a quarter of an hour, while my sister and I talk of family affairs."

Mary called the dog, who rushed after her to the library. She shut the door quietly.

" Is that your last new reader ? "

"My last, but in a manner my first, for she is the first that I could bear to hear."

"I think it was Austin who discovered her for you."

"Yes, Austin found her—a service for which I can never be too grateful."

"You were not very kind to the young lady I found for you—although she really deserved to be better appreciated—a girl of good birth and refined surroundings—in one word, a gentlewoman."

"An over-educated prig, who looked down upon her father, your High Church parson, and boasted of her own unbelief."

"I know she is a shade too modern, but she is steeped in the best literature, and I thought you would find her *simpatica*."

"That was exactly what I didn't find her. She made a parade of her consideration for my infirmities and kept my limitations perpetually *en évidence*. She got on my nerves worse than the red-haired girl Selina tried to plant upon me."

"Gladys Rotherham came from cultured people, and her manners were absolutely perfect. But since she couldn't please you, there's an end of it. You seem to be making a favourite of Austin's young person. I suppose you know all about her antecedents."

"As much as I want to know. I know that she is a lady—sensitive and sympathetic. I get no pin-pricks from Mary."

"Mary. Mary Smith? It sounds like an assumed name."

"Possibly. It is unpretentious, and suits my humour."

"But, as a man of the world, do you think it wise to make a favourite of your hired reader?"

"As a man whose world lies within the four walls of a library, I think wisdom consists in doing whatever pleases me. From the time my reading girl pleased me, I ceased to think of her as a hireling."

"And you treat her as if she were your adopted daughter."

"Why not?"

"Have you ever thought of the scandal that might arise from such favouritism?"

Conway gave her a withering look. But Guinevere knew she had undertaken a tough job, and she meant to go through with it.

"Scandal!" he echoed, in his strong deep voice, the voice that was not often heard. "Scandal about a man of whom there is nothing left but a mind! Nobody but a fool could make such a suggestion."

"It is not the first time you have called me a fool."

"And it may not be the last."

"I did not expect courtesy when I came here."

"If you don't like the other thing, you should stop away."

"I have a duty to my only brother—a special duty to you, Conway, although you have obstinately refused the sisterly affection that ought to have made a difference in your life."

"What difference? Could your affection have given me back the use of my limbs—could it have set me on a horse—flying through the freshness of spring, with the music of the hounds in my ears—could it have given me the world I knew and loved? Could it have made me something better than a body that cannot move, and a brain that cannot rest? Sisterly affection is no salve for wounds like mine."

"I hope you will find more consolation from Miss Smith."

"At any rate, she does not pretend to console me. She never hints at my limitations—to her I am a creature with an active mind, not a wreck of humanity to be soothed and pitied."

"Oh, I have no doubt she has plenty of tact—just as Becky Sharp had. Personally, she rather reminds me of Becky Sharp."

"I wish she were half as clever. I should adore a Becky Sharp. But such perfection is only possible in fiction," added Conway, with a sudden gaiety.

He knew that nothing so exasperated Guinevere as not to be taken seriously.

"I will say no more upon the situation as it may affect yourself, since I know you don't care what people think about you."

"Not a jot."

"But if you were not an egotist, you would have some consideration for the effect of such a false position on the young woman's future—her chance of marrying, or of another reputable situation after she leaves you."

"She will not leave me while I live."

"You will get tired of her—as you have done in other cases."

"I think not."

"I know you better than you know yourself, Conway. You will tire of this last whim, and the girl will be turned away with a blighted character."

"Skittles!"

"It is not skittles. The present position is impossible. No gentlewoman will take a girl who has been a solitary bachelor's companion. When the door of Warburton House shuts upon her Miss Smith will be stranded."

"She will never be stranded—as long as I live I shall want her—and I have provided for her when I am gone."

"A girl you have known half a year!"

"You were uneasy about her future, yet you look horrified when I tell you she is secure against want."

"If I am horrified, it is at the idea that you may have been imposed upon. The girl is clever enough to understand your whimsical character—your prejudices and your caprices. If she has obtained such an influence after half a year, what may not her power become in the future—a power that may shut your door against those who should be nearest and dearest."

"If by nearest and dearest you mean my sisters, they are not going to be shut out—not even you yourself, who generally come to this house intent upon giving me a lecture. Your last complaint was about my partiality

for Austin—I was making a favourite of Selina's son to the detriment of my other relations. Now it is Austin's protégée you object to."

"I have the highest appreciation of Austin's heart, but not much respect for his judgment—and I am sorry that a protégée of Austin's, perhaps picked out of the gutter, should come between me and my only brother's affection."

Conway sighed wearily.

"I have told you that my reading girl is a lady, and that she suits me. Let that suffice, Guinevere—unless you want a quarrel."

"Not for worlds. Every word you say tells me that Miss Smith's influence is paramount. I am told she walks by your chair in the Park every morning."

"Who told you?" he asked sharply.

"A friend of mine saw her with you."

"Yes, she walks by my bath-chair; but I dare say she is as sick of the Park as I am. I am going to Venice in the early spring. A gondola will be better than a bath-chair, and Mary will go with me."

"And you are not afraid of what people will say about such an arrangement?"

"Afraid! My dear creature, the outside world has no existence for me. I think no more of 'people' than of the myriads of invisible things that live and move in the air I breathe. In Venice I shall be more afraid of mosquitoes than of scandalmongers."

After this, Guinevere, tremulous with suppressed indignation, tried to talk of general subjects—asked if her brother had bought any pictures this year—expatiated on the wonderful prices Chelsea china had been fetching at Christie's—tried to be light and trivial and to make herself agreeable, and, utterly failing, departed with chilling dignity and a sisterly kiss, which Conway wiped off his forehead as the door closed upon her. His stroke upon the spring bell that summoned his valet was sharper than usual, and to Guinevere's ear had a sound of finality. A bell in the hall answered like an echo, and Miss Field had

three men-servants to escort her to her single brougham, quite the most perfect thing in miniature broughams, and so small that she could never be expected to give a friend a lift.

The ship-builder's eldest daughter had planned her life on severe lines. She had deeply resented her father's disposal of his property when he made an eldest son of Conway, then a boy at Eton. He had been infatuated about Conway. The lad was accomplished in the things that count. He was not a student, cared very little for books. But he was not a dunce, and he contrived to come through the scholastic part of his career respectably.

But it was in the playing fields that he shone. At cricket, at football, on the river, in the fencing school, in every attribute that youth delights in he was a head and shoulders over the best of his contemporaries. He made a name for himself before he left Eton, and he increased his reputation at Oxford. And when he spent his first idle winter at the place in Hampshire, and his father was able to see more of him, his horsemanship was the talk of every hunting man in the neighbourhood, and still more of the hunting women.

It was a kind of reputation that went far with the builder of ships, who wanted his son to be an English gentleman —a grand gentleman—and who made his will with that intent—" fifty thousand each to my daughters, and all the rest to my only son, Conway."

All the rest included the ship-building business on the Clyde, Madingley in Hampshire, a vast mansion, with some two thousand acres in a ring fence, and Warburton House, Mayfair.

Naturally, the daughters considered themselves left out in the cold, not to say defrauded, by their father's will—though they all maintained a certain decent reticence, and kept their feelings to themselves, except in the family circle, where, as the years went by, and the cost of living increased, the husbands were more inclined to grumble than the wives.

Guinevere had no husband to nibble at her fortune, and

could manage it as she pleased. She came to the conclusion that fifty thousand pounds was not much, and that she must spend her income scrupulously on herself. Even those friends of many years who loved Guinevere most—in a somewhat tepid way—admitted that Miss Field was near. That was the measured and moderate phrase—she was near. Her servants and her purveyors put the thing in broader speech—with them Miss Field was "a holy terror," "an out-and-out stinge."

With this concentrated view of her duty to herself, Miss Field made a better use of her income than any of her sisters. What could they do, wretched creatures with husbands, sons, or daughters always nibbling with a continuous depredation like the small sharp teeth of rats eating away a wainscot? How could they make a rational use of something between two and three thousand a year? Selina Sedgwick could not even afford herself a motor-car, at which deprivation her daughters never ceased to bewail themselves. Enid gave her son the larger part of her pin-money, and wheedled that brilliant goose, the K.C., into paying her milliner. Elaine had married a hopeless person: a certain Walter Halling, who had nothing to be proud of but his Saxon name, and whose only idea of industry was to write blank verse plays which no manager would read.

His wife being the only person who believed in Mr. Halling's talent, he had allowed her to settle a fifth of her fortune upon a country house and grounds in Wiltshire, where he finished his useless life with a certain pomp as recluse and cynic, and where Elaine, now a widow, devoted herself to her garden, and wasted her means upon new daffodils at forty shillings apiece, which did not always justify her by producing handsome blooms. Elaine used to cry when an expensive daffodil failed.

Guinevere looked with profound contempt upon these weaker sisters. She liked keeping accounts, and considered herself good at mental arithmetic. She went about calculating the cost of things, and by close calculation she contrived to maintain her second-floor flat in

Mayfair, with a side view of the omnibuses in Park Lane, her perfect butler and tall footman, and her accomplished French maid, her miniature brougham, and her expensive dress-maker, and to spend four to six weeks at a superior hotel in an English or foreign cure-place, where she only consorted with the best people. She did not care for the newly rich, however magnificent, nor did the newly rich care for her. They voted her an egregrious bore, and if they sent her a card for their sumptuous entertainments it was sent grudgingly.

She drove straight to Eaton Square, and sat with " poor Selina " for half an hour, talking over Conway's infatuation, and they were both of one mind.

" How Austin could have cut his own throat in such a manner passes my comprehension," said Guinevere, sinking into the most comfortable chair in the room. She always knew where that chair was to be found in everybody's drawing-room, and always took it. " My dear, I have just come from Warburton House, and I tell you that his infatuation for that white-faced minx is absolutely revolting."

" But you don't think he will disinherit his favourite nephew ? "

" I should hardly be surprised if he left the girl the bulk of his fortune. You have not studied human nature as closely as I have, Selina. And you may not know the pernicious influence an artful woman of attractive appearance can exercise upon a man of Conway's age—a man who has always shown a queer side in his character."

" But do you really think this young woman attractive ? Mrs. Tredgold made nothing of her appearance—said she was almost plain."

" I set no value upon Tredgold's judgment. Miss Smith is not beautiful, but she is worse. She has that kind of subtle charm that there is in a pale face and green eyes. She is what people call refined : looks as if she had come of a good stock. So no doubt she did, and went to the bad before your Austin found her. Where did he find her, by the way ? "

"We have never been able to get that out of him. He is quite as infatuated as his uncle."

"He has not bought her a poodle," Guinevere said sententiously, and left her sister to brood upon that enigmatical remark.

The poodle had more offended Miss Field than anything else in her brother's conduct. He had never given her a dog, and the one dog she esteemed worthy to sit in a lady's brougham was a highly educated French poodle, and she had been quick to perceive Zamiel's expensive perfections. A dog that could not have cost less than twenty-five pounds; bought to amuse Mary Smith!

X

IT was early spring, the time of daffodils in the London streets, and dog violets and wild anemones in the woods, and of early primroses peeping out here and there under the hedges and on the banks, which they would make glorious by and by.

Mr. Field had been seized with a roving humour, and he and Mary had come to Madingley, with valet, and footman, and the oldest and steadiest and most estimable of the Warburton House women-servants as Mary's own maid: promoted to that post because she was of mature age, nice-looking, and had been altogether satisfactory as upper housemaid, in seven years' service. "A person who has never given me any trouble," Mrs. Tredgold affirmed, when Mr. Field told her what he required; "and if you want a respectable maid for Miss Smith—and some such person she must of course have for decency's sake if she is to travel with you, as your reader—you cannot do better than take Susan Garland. She may not be accomplished as a lady's-maid, but Miss Smith has not been used to a maid, and will not want much in that line. But as a conscientious servant I can answer for her."

Upon this Susan was promoted, and became Garland instead of Susan. She was to have higher wages and to leave off caps. Mr. Field even insisted that she should have lessons in his art from a Bond Street hairdresser—much to Mrs. Tredgold's disgust, which she imparted all the more freely to Mr. Drayson, the butler, because she was obliged to suppress it in her conversation with her master.

They were going to Madingley for a few days, and then in the second week of April they were going from Southampton to Genoa by steamer and thence by long sea to Venice.

Mrs. Tredgold told Drayson that things had come to a pass—a phrase which might mean anything or nothing, but which seemed to relieve her mind.

Things had come to a pass, and Mary saw the first glory of the wind-flowers in the woods near Madingley.

Things had come to a pass, Mrs. Tredgold repeated. Never had Mr. Field been so full of whims and fancies till Miss Smith came into his service.

"I consider that young woman a most pernicious influence," said the housekeeper, with a sigh.

The butler, who agreed with her about most things, was of a different opinion in this instance.

"Not a bit of it, ma'am. She rouses him, and that does him good. Anything is better for him than the doldrums, and he was nearly always in the doldrums before Miss Smith came to amuse him."

"You don't look as deep into things as I do, Mr. Drayson. I know Mr. Field was sometimes in low spirits, and always trying as to temper. But no doldrums could be as dangerous for a man of his age as an artful young woman like Mary Smith. I knew she was a deep one the first time I set eyes upon her—before she had gone halfway up the staircase."

Mary had always this one enemy in Warburton House, but the other servants liked her, and Susan Garland, who took her the morning tea, and the *Morning Post*, went about the house praising her. She had no side, and she was just as clever as she could stick. Susan had certainly deserved her promotion, but while Mrs. Tredgold was sick with jealousy of Miss Smith, the four other housemaids, except the one who rose a step and was now "head," were all jealous of Garland, jealous but not rancorous, being ready to admit that Sue was a good sort.

It mattered nothing to Mary, sitting among the last of

the wind-flowers, with Zamiel nestling against her, and a pocket edition of "Pippa Passes" in her lap, what people in Warburton House were thinking about her. She had long ago accepted her relations with Mrs. Tredgold as a part of the day's work, and dismissed that lady from her thoughts. Sitting with her dog in the balmy April stillness, with flickering patches of light falling through the pine trees, and the blue heaven overhead, she was nearer absolute happiness than she had been since those young days when she had wandered about the shore with some stray mongrel for her companion, and when the sea and the moor were to her as living things that filled her life with joy. The sea and the moor and the mongrel and the inborn joyousness of her fifteenth year had been enough then; and now it was enough to have changed the dull splendour of Warburton House and the flatness and formality of Hyde Park for the beauty of this untrodden woodland, which seemed infinite in her ignorance of its extent. Hampshire is the most richly-wooded county in England, and Mr. Field's four or five hundred acres of beech and fir counted for very little within twenty miles of the New Forest.

Mary was not often alone, as her duties began early and ended late, but she had stolen this morning hour for an exploring walk with her poodle.

"I had to show him the woods, and he was so wild with delight at first that I think he must be a cockney," she told Mr. Field when she met him near the house, in his out-of-door chair, wheeled about by his valet.

"So you have been showing Zamiel the woods, and now I want to show you the gardens and the stables and the house. We shall only be here three days, and there is a good deal for you to see."

"How lovely!"

"What a vivid smile! You look as fresh as the morning. The country seems to suit you better than London."

"It is such a change! And the wood is new. There were no woods where I lived."

" If you are so pleased with Hampshire, what will you say to Venice ? "

" Oh, this is a delicious reality. That will be a dream of wonder. Let me read you the Venetian chapter in Dickens's ' Italy.' "

" And in Rogers and in Ruskin—and in Shelley and Byron. They can all rave about Venice. I think we had better stick to Ruskin. He is nearer the ground. Come, my dear, we will go through the gardens first, and then to the stables. I like to see them now and then, though they are heart-breaking."

The gardens were a surprise to Mary—so beautiful, so modern, and in such perfect order. They had the picturesque loveliness of old-world gardens, which is the most modern note in horticulture now that people with space and money at command can call back the charm of a day that is dead, and make their grounds Jacobean or Tudor as fancy prompts.

It was the season of tulips, and everything that could be done with brilliant colour had been done at Madingley —great crimson and amber chalices, waving on tall stems, crowding close together, purple tulips three feet high in the background of a long border. Parrot tulips, gaudy and ragged, and the pale beauty of pink and white tulips in oval beds cut in turf that was like green velvet. There were more men than Mary could count, moving about with the serene and leisurely aspect of gardeners at Kew or Hampton Court, gardeners whose work and wages went on from year's end to year's end, and who meant to live and die at Madingley. As a central point amidst all the colour and splendour of the tulip beds there rose a tall shaft of water, golden in the sunlight, from a circular pond in which Zamiel had been quick to see living creatures that he would like to get at, and was meditating a plunge, when Mary called him to heel.

Mary gazed and admired in silence. Behind her sense of the charm of the garden there was her thought of the owner of all this beauty, who had not seen the place for some years. Ridley had told her that it was a long time

since his master had wanted to see Madingley, and in all that time the little regiment of gardeners had been going about with wheelbarrows and water-engines, and Dutch hoes, and the great chestnut horse with the long whity-brown tail and mane had been moving slowly over the lawns with mowing machine or roller, and the tall shaft of sparkling water had been shooting up towards the blue sky, and all the loveliest flowers of spring and summer and autumn had bloomed and faded, and the master had never seen them.

And yet he might have been there. He had but to give the order, and he would have been carried in ease and comfort to this wonderful garden, and the woodland upon which it bordered. There was the pity of it. He did not care. The will to enjoy was wanting, the pleasure in beautiful possessions and the pride of life were over and done with.

"Well, Mary? Do you like my garden?" he asked languidly.

Her eyes filled with tears.

"It is too lovely," she said.

"I ought hardly to call it my garden. My father created it, as he did everything that is best at Madingley. There were the ruins of a Jacobean garden, that had been neglected for a century, and these served for his ground plan. All the rest was his work."

"Not that Tudor house over there?" she said, pointing to a long low red house in a garden, which was divided from one of the Madingley lawns by a sunk fence. "Surely that is old."

"No, my father pulled down a trumpery stuccoed villa in which the last owner's land-agent had lived, and built that Tudor house for his man. It is the exact reproduction of a small Elizabethan Manor house, even to the linen panelling in the parlours."

"And are your land-agent's children allowed to run about in your gardens, when you are not living here?"

"I suppose they would be allowed if there were children

—but my agent has only one son, and he is in the Guards."

This paradise of flowers and wide lawns and flashing water was maintained for nobody, nobody but the gardeners and the birds.

Conway showed her the gardeners' cottages, the perfection of small dwellings. She and Zamiel went over one that happened to be empty. Never had she seen anything so perfect—a mansion in miniature. Happy gardeners, thrice blessed gardeners' wives, who lived with such comfort, in a world that seemed made up of woods and gardens.

Mr. Field listened with some show of pleasure to Mary's praise of Madingley, as she walked slowly beside the wheelchair.

" My father made the place," he said, in his low grave voice. " Whatever he created was perfect. He had the unerring eye, the sure hand. His shipyard was the finest in Scotland, and Field's ships were known all over the world. He was not a self-made man. He began his career with an assured position, and a fortune which most men would have thought enough for a life of pleasure. But my father was a creator. To improve and to extend his business, to do things better that had always been done well, was necessary to his existence. He could not sit down in a paradise that another man had made. He had always in his mind the image of a great-grandfather, a dock labourer, who had made the business of John Field & Son, ship-builders, out of nothing but brains and labour. There is a monument in the crypt under Glasgow Cathedral that tells the story of Andrew Field. If I were not too much of a cynic, I should be proud of the race from which my father came—for they were men of iron, and there was never profligate, drunkard, or wastrel among them. It is because my father made this place and loved it that I try to keep things here as he would have liked to see them."

" I can understand," Mary said softly, " and I dare say you let your sisters live here sometimes."

"Never," he answered sharply, with a frown. "I will have no one else live in the place that I cannot enjoy. My sisters and I are antagonistic. We neither understand nor care for each other. My nephews, Austin and George, are the only pieces of my flesh and blood that have ever come near my heart. I have a liking for them that is almost love. Austin is a saint, and George is a fine creature—but not by any means a saint."

They went through the stables which were the crowning splendour of Madingley—stables built round a spacious quadrangle, where a jet of water taller than the fountain in the garden shot up from a great oval basin of Scotch granite. There were loose boxes for forty horses, a forge, an infirmary, rooms for grooms and underlings, a saddle-room as large as a church, and everything in perfect order, though there were only three men in charge, where there had once been twenty grooms, a dozen lads, blacksmith, and veterinary surgeon.

It was a dead world. While the gardens suggested some scene of enchantment, where fairies had stopped the clock, the stables made Mary think of some dead city, like Pompeii or Herculaneum, where life had ended in a swift and sudden tragedy.

She saw the infinite pain in Conway Field's face, as they went round the quadrangle, and then into the huge stable where door after door was opened by the men, showing the double row of boxes, each with a window above the manger—a place of air and light.

She fancied she could follow his thoughts, and realize the bitterness of them, as he looked into those empty places and remembered what had been.

He was unusually silent when they went back to the house, and did not allow Mary to read to him.

"Madingley must be my book for to-day," he said, "a melancholy story. You can run about and look at things—pictures, china, ghosts. We will have no reading till after tea. Your dinner will be served in the garden-parlour, the prettiest room in the house—but you can have tea in the library with me."

" You are not ill? " she asked, forgetting her rule of never talking about his health.

" Only tired."

Everything in the house was in as perfect order as the gardens. The housekeeper was wife of Mr. Moffatt, the head-gardener, a stout, comfortable woman, with a pleasant face and pleasant manners, well-spoken but not superior, the antipodes of Mrs. Tredgold. There were half a dozen country-bred wenches under her control, and there was not a room in the great stately house that could not be made ready for occupation in an hour.

" Mr. Ridley said it was his master's orders that you were to be made very comfortable, ma'am, so I've put you into Miss Field's bedroom, which is one of the best in the house."

" And has Miss Field never been here—since ? "

" Never since the accident to her brother. He couldn't bear anybody about him, poor gentleman. The house was full of people—Miss Field, and Mrs. Halling, and Mrs. Sedgwick, and friends of Mr. Field's—hunting gentlemen, but they all left next morning, and the house was turned into a hospital—nurses and doctors at every hand's turn. I was a giddy girl of sixteen, half my time in the still-room and half at the sewing-machine, working for the housemaids, and I shall never forget that dreadful time when nobody thought Mr. Field could live to the end of the year. Oh, the long melancholy days in the silence where the nurses went about like ghosts in their hospital shoes; and the worse nights when nobody seemed to sleep, because of the sound of doors opening and shutting, slowly and softly, as if a murderer was creeping about in the darkness, and the sound of a nurse tapping at the doctor's bedroom door, and the shuffling of his slippers as he hurried along the passage. It was all dreadful, and I thought Madingley could never be the same again—but my mother was housekeeper in those days, so I stayed on with her, and three or four under-servants, in the dreadful house till my two-and-twentieth

birthday, when I married young Moffatt, who was the cleverest of all the men in the garden, and bid fair to become head-gardener even at eight-and-twenty. My mother had lived with the Randall Danverses, and stayed on when Mr. John Field bought the estate. She was one of your old-fashioned servants, and she was buried from Madingley."

The housekeeper, being once allowed to talk, was not easy to stop; but Mary liked her friendly chatter, and was deeply interested in the tragedy that had blighted Conway Field's life.

She went about the house with Mrs. Moffatt while Garland unpacked and arranged her clothes with infinite pains, and as if for a lifetime, in the handsome, early-Victorian bedroom, where nothing had been altered since Miss Field's occupation. She went about looking at stately rooms where there had been no life or movement for thirty years. A music-room where no one had made music—a grand piano shut like a tomb—a ballroom where no light foot had touched the floor, a dining hall with a minstrels' gallery, where only the sound of brooms and scrubbing brushes had broken the mournful silence. In all these rooms it was the sadness rather than the splendour that impressed Mary Smith.

Late in the evening, after she had been reading for nearly three hours, and had just finished Jowett's translation of the Phaedo, Mr. Field startled her with a sudden question.

"What do you think of my country place, Mary?"

"It is quite beautiful."

"You like it better than Warburton House?"

"No."

"No?" with surprise. "I thought it would take your fancy. It is more of a woman's idea of a fine house."

"It is splendid, but it might be anybody's house. Warburton has more individuality. It is unlike any other house I can imagine. You know I have seen only pictures of grand houses, and read descriptions of them. They

have all seemed alike, somehow, old or modern; the interiors seemed all of the same pattern. But Warburton House has individuality—what critics call the personal note."

"You mean that it is the house of a collector."

"It is your house. You have made it. Your mind is in every room—the gallery with the Italian girl in her common chair—so simple, so human, so unlike other statues."

"Gibson's tinted Venus was the rage in that same exhibition—a lovely thing—but they were wide as the poles asunder. Well, I'm glad you like Warburton House, as I shall always want you there. Well, Mary, it seems you do not greatly admire Madingley, and I must own that it is contemptibly modern. I hope you noticed the double staircase. That is the chief feature of the house from an architect's point of view."

"It is very grand."

"It was meant to be grand. My father thought much of it. The landing is seventy feet by thirty. There are no statues, no splendid Oriental vases—as there ought to be—but my father was not a collector. If you were mistress of the house that is where you would receive your guests—when you gave a big party."

He closed his eyes as he lay back upon his heaped up pillows, and there was a smile upon the thin expressive lips. He could fancy her standing there, against the dark red background in the soft light of innumerable candles, graceful, unconscious of her beauty, a tall slip of a girl with a lovely head and throat.

"That's where you would stand to receive half the county, at one of your parties—a dance—or a concert," he said, opening his eyes and looking at her. "You would be wearing a diamond tiara and a satin gown with a long train—a green gown, perhaps, like the sheath of a lily—would you like it, Mary? Would it please you to see the long procession coming up to you, open-eyed, smirking, admiring, all with the same words and the same grimaces, worshipping you—not because you are you,

but for the amount of your fortune, and the splendour of Madingley. That's what it all means, Mary. Not what you are, but what you have."

She looked at him seriously, wondering that he should talk such foolishness, he who had been so full of melancholy thoughts as they went round the quadrangle, where the tall shaft of water leaping into the air was the only movement, and the whinnying of a serviceable pony the only sound of equine life in stables that had been built for a populace of horses. She was used to his moods and caprices, yet this change surprised her.

"You have known what it is to be poor. Would it make you happy to be inordinately rich?" he asked sharply, after a silence.

"No," she answered, startled, with a look of pain. "It would be no good. My father is dead. I have no one in the world."

"But for yourself? To be rich, to have crowds of slaves—all the dust-lickers of this earth. Would that be no good?"

"Oh, you know, you know," she answered piteously. "You know my story. Why do you ask me such a question? What could I do with money? Nothing could bring back the things that I have lost?"

"What if I don't know your story?"

"You must have guessed—and Mr. Sedgwick must have told you everything he knows about me—and he knows all."

"He told me very little. I asked no questions. I have done with prejudices and suspicions since I have been lying in my mattress-grave."

"Did he never tell you that I had a child?"

The delicate face flushed crimson as she asked the question. The shame of that unhallowed birth had never been forgotten.

"No."

"I had a son whose birth was my disgrace—but whose life was my joy. I can never tell you how I loved him. He died before he was two years old. I had him less

than two years, and I shall never cease to grieve for the loss of him."

"My poor girl! And so that is your story?"

"It is all that is worth telling. His father was splendid in some ways—splendidly clever, splendidly handsome—a king of men. But he was false and cruel. I think he loved me at one time, after his own fashion, yet I was not sorry when he left me, although I knew it was for ever."

"But he will come back some day and claim you. He will want you again."

"Never—never—and if he did he would be nothing to me. My love was dead before my child was born. The child was the only tie that bound us, and when he died the bond was broken."

"Well, let us hope he never will come back. We don't want him, Mary. Splendidly handsome—a king of men. That sounds as if you still love him."

"No, no, no! I had to tell you that to explain his power over me. I was not eighteen, and he was my master."

"*Tout comprendre est tout pardonner,*" Mr. Field said softly. "I understand your poor little story. There is a story in most people's lives, Mary, however commonplace the life may seem. Behind the stolid faces—out of harmony with the clumsy figures—there is one inner chamber, one romantic page—sometimes a tragedy. Some night at Venice I will tell you my tragedy. And now, my dear, you must forget your king of men, and remember that you have one true and loyal friend in the world—that as long as he lives Conway Field will want you, and will do all he can to make your life happy."

She could not thank him. Her face was hidden under her clasped hands. There were tears in her voice when she tried to answer him, and her words of gratitude and affection were almost inarticulate. But Conway Field did not want to be thanked. He dismissed his reader with a smile, and the hand which he gave her lay languidly in hers when he bade her good-night.

XI

APRIL was nearly over when they landed at Venice. The winds and the waves had been kind, and Mr. Field was all the better for the sea voyage. From Southampton to Genoa in the big liner, from Genoa in a small coasting steamer, all had gone well, and the English invalid, with his men-servants and girl-companion, accounted for by the curious as a daughter or a niece, had been an object of interest to all the passengers.

Mary Smith was in Venice. From her window in the big hotel on the Riva degli Schiavoni, a patchwork of deserted palaces, where every room must have had a history, she could look across the level water to the Church of San Giorgio, she could see the painted sails of the home-coming fishermen's boats shining in the sunset, when the day's work was done. She was in the city of dreams—the one marvellous city that custom cannot stale nor age wither. She was in Venice, and all that was sad and dark in her past life fell from her like a worn-out garment. She was a new creature in a new world. Everything she saw was so strange and yet so familiar. The churches, the palaces, the Piazza, the Custom House, the Rialto, were as well known in every detail as Hyde Park and Byron's statue. She had seen them all and lingered over them in photographs, richly illustrated books, and Mr. Field's Canalettos and Guardis. But the sumptuous beauty of Venice in the April sunshine was something beyond the power of art. Only in one of Turner's pictures had there been the magic of the scene she saw in the golden evening.

Happily the atmosphere of the place suited Conway

Field. He slept better in his room on the *piano nobile*—a room that looked as if it was haunted—than in his spacious bedroom in Warburton House. There he had every conceivable luxury. Here he had ponderous white and gold furniture that had more of archaic splendour than of modern convenience. There he had the quiet of a house enclosed in a courtyard, remote from traffic. Here he had the lapping of the sea against the stone parapet, the sound of many voices and the passing of many footsteps deep into the night, the distant cry of the gondoliers in the narrow canals ; a life that in those soft sweet nights of April seemed to go on till morning. Yet here sleep was kinder, and Mary was not often summoned to sit beside his bed and read to him in the small hours. She had told Ridley to call her when his master was restless and miserable. And she sometimes sat in her dressing-gown, reading or working, with only intervals of slumber, till two o'clock in the morning, ready for such a summons. She was at the age that does not care about sleep, and when Mr. Field expressed his concern for her broken nights spent in his service, she told him that she had never been a good sleeper, and that she would rather read to him than lie awake and think.

" True, Mary, anything is better than long thoughts. And remember you are to be as late as you like in the morning. Morning sleep is sometimes sweet, full of beautiful dreams."

" I have only one beautiful dream," Mary said softly, " and that does not come often."

He knew that the dream was of her dead child. He knew what such dreams were like. He had had those dreams himself, more than thirty years ago—the dreams in which the dead was alive again, and never had been dead—and he knew how sweet such visions were, and the misery of awaking.

They had been drawn closer together since Mary had told him her story. They were drawn still closer when Conway told her the tragedy of his twenty-seventh year, more tragic even than the catastrophe that befell him when

his favourite mare blundered at a fence, broke her back, and rolled over him in her death-struggle.

They had been in Venice about ten days, when he had his first wakeful night, and Ridley came at half-past one to tell Miss Smith that his master was awake, and very restless. Ridley thought that he was unhappy about something. He had sighed often, and seemed so miserable that Ridley for his own part had not been able to sleep. The valet had his bed in a room next his master's, with the door of communication open, and was always quick to hear the electric bell.

Mary had been reading, with intervals of gazing out of the window, a gauze veil wrapped round her face and head to keep off the mosquitoes.

"What shall I read to you?" she asked, seating herself in a chair that always stood ready for her by the bedside. There was a table near the chair, heaped with books.

"May I read Rogers, or Shelley?"

"No, my dear—I couldn't stand either. I don't want poetry, or prose. Go back to bed."

"I have not been to bed. It is a glorious night. I have been sitting by the window. Ridley told me you were restless."

"He might have told you I was miserable, but he is too much a gentleman to tell my secrets. I have been cursed with retrospective thoughts. Stay with me for an hour, Mary. Shut your door, Ridley, and go back to bed. I will ring if I want you. And now switch off the light, and open the windows. The mosquitoes won't find us if we sit in the dark."

"There will be no darkness," Mary said, as she drew back the curtains and opened the casements and let in the splendour of the full moon, riding high under a world of greater lights.

"When you told me your sad story, I told you that some day you should hear mine."

There was a long silence, while Mary waited motionless in the old Italian chair, watching the moonlight on the polished floor, and that far-off light, a long line of silver

on the crest of the waves between Venice and the Lido.

"I was the spoilt child of fortune and a too indulgent father, my dear, and there are not many lads who could have borne such a youth as mine and not come out of it badly—worse perhaps than I did. I was full of whims and caprices—vague dreams—idle ambitions—and every caprice was gratified. My father was too rich to care what I spent, or even to realize that I was spending too much for my own welfare. Nor did he realize that the rich set at the 'Varsity is almost always the worst set. I had been in the rich set at Eton, and I had my cheque-book before I was fifteen. I was at the House, and a notoriety in the Bullingdon Club. My hunting stable cost me a thousand a year. But I soon got tired of it all—except the hunting. I was a sybarite, but not a sensualist—and I was never a profligate, nor a woman-hunter.

"When I left Oxford I was twenty-two, and tired of everything except my hunters, and the rapture of flying over a six-foot hurdle. I oscillated between London and Madingley, where my father was absorbed in the creation of an estate which he told everybody was to be mine, and where my two younger sisters were being courted by the men they were soon to marry and my eldest sister was being hotly pursued by half the county. She was handsome in those days, though always like Eleanor of Aquitaine, and she was credited with greater expectations than the fifty thousand my father intended for her.

"I had always been able to draw and paint more or less badly. It was my only accomplishment except riding; and, though I painted worse than I rode, I had a keen love of art. All my time in London was spent among artists. They did not discourage, but they never flattered me. And they told me that my only chance was to work hard for two or three years in one of the famous Continental schools—Antwerp or Paris. I chose Paris, and I lived there for a year in the Quartier Latin, Trilby's Paris. You know Trilby?"

"Yes. A charming story."

"I had never cared ardently for women. They are too troublesome. They want too much from a man. But I suppose in every man's life there is one woman—the inevitable. My fate was waiting for me in the Quartier Latin. I came upon an artist's model as lovely but not so prodigal of her beauty as poor Trilby. No painter, in fact, had seen more of her charms than a *débutante* displays at her first ball—an exquisite head, a perfect throat and shoulders. It took me a long time to make her mine. But with the help of a mother who had been ground all her life under the heel of poverty, I succeeded at last. I established her in a commodious apartment, a third floor in a tall new house near the Champs Élysées—spacious rooms, prettily furnished, with the finest view in Paris. She soon forgot the sacrifice she had made for me, and I knew that she was happy. She was the only woman I ever loved, and I was completely happy with her. If she had been as clever as Trilby—if she had had a mind as well as a heart—I would have married her. Class distinctions had little weight with me, but beauty without intellect, however sweet, however tender, was not enough. There was always something wanting—the *au delà*. I could imagine Talleyrand, as an old man, satisfied with a lovely simpleton. But I was young, with my life before me, and I could not look down the long avenue of years, and see myself happy with this dear creature."

There was a long pause, and Mary, waiting in the silence, heard a stifled sob. And then Conway Field went on.

His voice had changed; his speech was more laboured, and Mary knew that every word was pain.

"We were utterly happy. I slacked off in my work. I gave myself up to that sweet companionship. We went about holiday-making in the villages near Paris, we spent the late summer at Fontainebleau, where I made a pretence of open-air painting. At the first touch of winter, seeing that she was frail and delicate, I took her off in a hurry to the Italian Riviera, where we stayed till spring.

Her hope of being a mother was disappointed; but she gave me all her love, and that was enough. Still, at the back of my head there was always the thought of our parting. Soon or late that sad farewell had to come."

"Oh, what a pity!" sighed Mary.

"Yes, child, the pity of it! I received an urgent letter from my father. He had always impressed upon me that I must marry well, that is to say, marry a woman whose people would look down upon me, even if she did not. And now the time had come and the opportunity. I was eight-and-twenty, high time for me to set about the only duty that indulgent parent had ever laid upon me. I was to marry, and found a family. The hour had come and with it the woman—Lord Riversdale's daughter, good-looking, amiable, poor enough to be attracted by a handsome establishment and generous pin-money. The husband would be a detail.

"My father had been with me in Paris for more than one visit during my work at the Art School. He stayed at Meurice's, and asked no embarrassing questions about my rooms in the Champs Élysées, though I had never withheld my address there. The sympathy between us was too complete for him to be in doubt as to what had happened, and he was not long in obtaining my confidence. I could keep no secrets from such a father and such a friend. I think if I had told him that it would break my heart to leave Suzanne, he would have told me to marry her. He was capable of relinquishing his cherished plan, and accepting this girl as a daughter-in-law. But I made no appeal to him. I did not tell him that my happiness was at stake. He did not ask to see her. But he urged me to leave Paris as soon as possible, and take up my quarters at Madingley early in October. I was to provide generously for Suzanne's future. He gave me carte blanche, and would make himself responsible for any settlement I thought fit to make.

"I have never forgotten the aspect of Paris that peerless day in late September: a city built for happy people and happy thoughts.

" I walked up and down the bright gay avenues with a heart of lead, thinking of what I was to say to my dear Suzanne, and of how my young years were to end that afternoon. I felt somehow that when I shut the door upon the rooms where we had been so fond and so happy, I should shut the door upon youth.

" The world seemed full of sunshine, not a leaf had fallen from the chestnuts, and the flower-beds were aflame with scarlet and gold. Paris was alive again after its summer solitude, and the broad avenue was full of carriages and gaily-dressed people. I felt like a man in a bad dream—such brightness without, and such blackness within.

" I had done nothing to prepare Suzanne for our separation. God forgive me! I had thought of myself and my own feelings. For I felt that I could better bear the parting if I made it short and sharp, like the fall of the headsman's sword. I was walking about to steady my nerves, and think out what I had to say, first to her mother and then to her. To her mother all business details of the provision I was to make for them both. To Suzanne only words of love and grief.

" I found the mother tractable, as she had been in all the time of our association. She had suffered the martyrdom of poverty long enough to feel that with ample means for comfort and security no other trouble mattered. She shed tears when she told me that her girl would be heartbroken, but the tears were soon dried when she heard the amount of the income I was going to settle upon mother and daughter, and she thanked me for my generosity and unvarying kindness to herself. No, she did not think her daughter would ever marry. She loved me too well to care for anyone else, though she had had admirers *pour le bon motif*, before she met me. With such a dot as I proposed a comfortable marriage would be easy. But she did not believe Suzanne would endure the sight of a lover, however worthy.

" She followed me into the room where I found Suzanne —our little *salon*, so bright and gay, with its wide window

opening on a balcony, where we had so often sat late upon a sultry evening, watching the lamps of carriages moving in a triple line towards the Bois, foolish coloured lamps that made a chain of jewels, vanishing into the dusk of the night.

"The casements were open, and I could hear the murmur of multitudinous voices, and see far away across the white roads and green trees to the purple distance beyond the race-course.

"And then I told her! I had promised my father that I would go back to England at the end of the month, and that to please that kindest of fathers I was going to marry an English lady whom he had chosen for my wife.

"She stood before me white and speechless while I struggled through my wretched explanation, dwelling on my love for her—my father's goodness—the immeasurable debt of gratitude and obedience that I owed him. Her eyes grew wider and wider as she looked at me—dry eyes, terrible with an infinite despair. But she spoke no word, till she rushed to me, and flung her arms round my neck, and implored me not to leave her. Her passionate entreaty, her flood of tears unmanned me. I unwound the clinging arms and put her gently from me. Think what it was to put her away! I had loved her, and she had given me all that love could give. The two best years of my life had been spent with her, and the future looked cold and dark as I left her! I was halfway down the stairs to the next story when I heard a wild shriek from above, and rushed back—back to her. But it was not she who had shrieked. The room was empty.

"Her mother was in the balcony, leaning over the railing, screaming to the people below. There were voices and cries in the street. She had thrown herself out of the balcony. There were frantic men and women clustering round a white figure, lying on the pavement.

"That was the end of my only love story. The one inevitable love had come to me, and that was what I made of it."

Mary was crying silently, suppressing her tears in her infinite pity for this poor wreck of manhood.

" Not a day passes that I do not think of her, and think of what might have been : how I might have had her educated, and how her mind would have widened and ripened in association with the friends I could have given her, and the best side of life and the world. She would not have always been a simpleton. There were no vulgar instincts, no stubborn self-conceit to be overcome. As years went on she would have made herself all I wanted her to be. We should have grown as near in thought as we were in love. Useless regrets ! Wasted pain ! Now you know my story, you and I will be even more in sympathy than we have been. Good-night, my dear."

XII

GEORGE BERTRAM was "fed up" with Swiss mountains.

"It is a hateful phrase, Austin, but there's nothing else that so well expresses a man's feeling when he has had more than enough of a thing. I am fed up with Mont Blanc and the Matterhorn, Monte Rosa and the Jungfrau —and I think you must be pretty much the same. We have run all the risks—seen all that the earth and sky in these regions can give us—all the colours and all the splendid accidents of sunrise and sunset from mountain tops. We have done the thing *ad nauseam*, and nothing less than the steepest peak in the Karakorum range could give me a thrill worth having. I swear there is more adventure to be had in a night in Poplar or Bethnal Green than in all these everlasting snows. If a man wants to live at high pressure he can do it in your London slums. I am dead sick of mountaineering."

"And of a good many other things, I'm afraid."

"What is there on this earth that doesn't sicken a man when he has broken his toy drum and found nothing inside?"

George gave a long melancholy yawn, like the howl of a solitary dog in his kennel—a prisoner—unpitied—and hungry.

"Shall I give a name to your complaint, George?" his cousin asked gently.

The two men were wide as the poles asunder in character and ideas. One was keenly interested in his fellow-men, full of purpose and unselfish, as nearly an altruist as a man can be, and yet live in the everyday world—not a professed Socialist, but with an almost divine sense

of brotherhood with all suffering creatures, down to the dregs and offscouring of society. The other was unsympathetic from want of understanding, rather than from want of heart.

He had been down into the depths with Austin more than once—had spent nights in workmen's shelters and even in thieves' kitchens ; but he had got no nearer to the men he saw there. Though their haggard faces had haunted him, and the sound of their raucous voices had mixed with his gloomy dreams, the experience had ended in nothing more than a twenty-pound cheque to Austin.

" You are simply splendid," he said, " and as far as money can go I love to help you. But I could never do such work on my own. I don't understand your poor wretches. I should never get in touch with them."

" If they were dogs you would understand them."

" Dogs are such pathetic beasts, they go straight to one's heart."

George had a passion for animals. It was the soft side of a nature that most people had found hard. He did not care for women. His first love had been unlucky, and having been deceived by one woman he had hardened his heart against all the rest—would just acknowledge that his mother was a good woman and stop at that.

" Of course there are good mothers and good wives in the world," he said, " but they are the exceptions—the blue diamonds—the black pearls—and a man is a fool who thinks he can come by such creatures easily. Rare as rubies, said King Solomon, and he knew what he was talking about."

This fit of disgust at the end of a season in Switzerland had happened a good many years ago, when George was still in his first youth, and when he was still bruised and broken by the blow that had left him inert and hopeless in the time that should have been the morning of life. There had always been something difficult in his nature —something in his temperament that came between him and the joy of life. Even before his first passionate attachment came to a bitter end, there had been an

inclination to doubt all that seemed fairest on the surface of life. He had taken up the attitude of a cynic before he left Oxford, perhaps with some touch of affectation—the young man's desire to be unlike other young men—and that unhappy first love affair had made him cynical to the core. He took no more interest in that quintessence of dust, the mass of his fellow-creatures, and thought badly of all mankind because one woman had cheated him.

He had left Oxford with the reputation of being the most promising among the clever young men of his year. But perhaps it was the kind of promise that rarely results in great performance. He had the all-round cleverness of a young man of various tastes and inclinations, talent without perseverance. Quick at understanding, he was never strenuous in labour. He had been able to take a first in " greats," although in his 'Varsity days he had a passion for art, and spent a good deal of his time roaming about the country round Oxford painting in water-colour and thinking poetry.

He had a fancy for verse at this youthful stage of his life, and wrote a tragedy on the classic lines—awful as Aeschylus—musical as Milton—which seemed splendid while he was writing it and worthless when it was finished. He read his play to a friendly don and a few college chums. And, seeing a certain coldness in their reception of his grandest scenes—despite their flattering assurance that the piece was magnificent as poetry, although hardly suited to the modern stage—he stirred his fire to a cheerful blaze while his guests were bidding him good-night, and threw his manuscript into the heart of the flames when they were gone.

His love of art and his talent for water-colour landscape were stronger than his capacity for verse, and his youthful performances pleased his uncle, who talked to him with a curious sadness of his own early ambition.

There was always a certain sympathy between Conway Field and this brilliant nephew of his. And the sympathy lasted when the brilliancy had worn off and the

eminent K.C.'s only son had taken a back seat in London society, where only the undergraduates of his year remembered what a superior person he had been at Oxford.

Meeting a fellow of Magdalen at a dinner-party, he might be reminded with urbane reproach how much had been expected of him in those old days. And the reproach was the only recognition that he was ever likely to receive of gifts which had been called exceptional. He had had his chance and missed it. His father had wanted him to go to the Bar, could have done much for him, but the Law had no attraction for him. The very fact of his father's success seemed to shut the door against him. His father was wonderful, had worked his way to the front with nothing but his own talent and invincible patience to help him, and was one of the foremost men of his time; one of those supreme advocates who are at their best when the issues are tremendous and the odds against them, like the incomparable jockeys who can win any race on any horse —whose failures are a negligible quantity.

The father's success had a deterrent influence on the son. It irked him to play second fiddle—to have briefs given to him because he was John Bertram's son.

"I should never come near you in any of the qualities that make a great advocate," he told his father. "The solicitors would be civil to me for your sake, and I should waste the brightest hours of youth on counsel's opinions at two guineas each. If I were to work hard and steadily —which I'm afraid isn't in me to do—I should remain a rotter. I have neither love nor understanding for Law. When I think of your career I seem to be looking across a vast impenetrable labyrinth, a land of thorny paths and prickly hedges and blind pitfalls, which you have trodden with indomitable resolve and the patience of a martyr until the thorny paths are worn smooth and the prickly pears are changed to roses. You had the brain and the will to conquer where I should be a hopeless failure."

John Bertram heard him with a touch of scorn for youth that wanted ease and pleasure. In the hard school where he had graduated youth had to work for its bread. He

had known the discipline of grinding poverty before he made his mark at the Bar, and seemed to have a long life behind him at five-and-thirty when he married Enid Field. His practice as a stuff gown had been so good, that he only took silk to please his fiancée.

"If I lose half my work it will be your fault," he told her; "but if you think the two letters after my name are worth half my present income——"

To Enid's mind they were. A clever lawyer meant very little for her and her girl friends, but a distinguished K.C. was at least respectable. He had some substantial victories before the gloss was off the silk, and at forty he was making ten thousand a year, which increased by leaps and bounds to thirty thousand.

He knew that it was the experience of those barren years—his work in America—his work in a stockbroker's office—before he went to the Bar—that had made him the man he was, and he knew that his only son could never be such a man.

While he was at Eton the boy had set his heart on soldiering—in the Engineers. But here his mother interfered, and told him in a flood of tears that he would break her heart if he went into the Army.

"I should never know an instant's peace," she said. "My nights would be one long misery, haunted with horrors. Wait till I am dead. Oh, my best beloved, wait till I am dead!" she wailed. "Wait till I am dead!" Which from a parent of nine-and-thirty was a large order.

His mother had been in some wise his evil genius, loving him not wisely but too well. She was not the heroic mother who could tell the son she adored: "Come back to me with your shield or on it." George was very young in those days—young and tender-hearted—and he had given her his promise. He had not said: "I will never be a soldier." But he had said: "I will try never to make you unhappy."

Then after Eton had come Magdalen, and a brief interval of religious enthusiasm, when he had tramped about Oxford thinking of Newman and the hot days of Tract

Ninety. He had thought then of reading for the Church —a fitful enthusiasm—a flame that flashed and flickered and soon went out.

His facility in painting the creeks and crannies along the Upper Thames, and the pleasure he felt in doing it, inspired him with the idea of taking up art seriously, strenuously, as soon as he had got his degree.

He showed his latest sketches to Conway Field in his last Long Vacation, and talked about Art.

"My mother told me how clever you were, and how you studied in Paris," he said, sitting by his uncle's sofa in the library, where the Venetian shutters kept the room in shadow. "Will you tell me about your experience in the art schools there?"

And then, even in that half-light, he saw a sudden change in his uncle's face, a look of infinite pain.

"All art schools are alike," Conway answered slowly, after a perceptible pause; "their value depends upon the pupil."

"Yes, yes, of course, and I'm afraid I am not of the right stuff. I get tired of work if I can't look down a vista that ends in success. I am not like my father. I can't row hard against stream."

"You didn't go to the right school."

"What is the matter with Eton?"

Conway Field dismissed the question with a wave of his hand.

"You didn't graduate in the school of poverty. That's where small boys learn to be great men. There's no harm done, my dear fellow. It isn't your fault that you are an only son, with a rich father, and a mother who worships you. A fig for law, and a fig for art. Enjoy the golden days, for they are short. Have your fling."

George had his fling. He had his golden days—those days of youth that are so sweet, though they sometimes leave a bitter taste in the mouth and are sad in the thoughts of age—the days when pleasure is new and has a flavour it can never have again, and love is the whole wide world, the sea, and the overarching heaven—the days when

nothing else matters while the one inevitable woman fills the foreground of life.

In that half-world where the pulse of life beats fast, George met the inevitable woman, and loved and believed, where love and faith are wasted. He shut his ears against the facts of the case ; would accept no warning ; listen to no friendly counsel. " My love and I against the world," he said. " If there has been anything in the past, that is ancient history. I can trust the future." He went to his doom with his eyes open. The banns had been read twice in the new suburban church when the lady left the bijou house in the little street where Guizot had lived in his days of exile, and vanished into thin air.

Her farewell letter was brief, but to the point :

" I could not stick it, old dear. The thought of having to be ultra-respectable all the rest of my days got on my nerves. I want movement, change, a crowd of admirers, the rush of life. I am ten years too young and ten times too handsome to sit down in a flat in Cromwell Road, with servants I should have to look after, and order your dinner every day, and walk in the Park with you, among people I don't know, and cut all my old friends. Apperley has been after me for the last six months, though you haven't run against him—the celebrated Fred Apperley. They know all about him in New York—not a Pierpont Morgan or a Rockefeller—but just one of their common or garden millionaires, with a yacht like a liner. Think of it—a yacht with half a dozen stewards, a floating palace. It makes your second-floor flat look mean. Fred's going to take me round the world, a two years' trip, and he will marry me before we come back, if he can get shut of the girl he married last year at Chicago, and if I like. Good-bye, George. What I am doing is best for you and best for me.

" Your true friend,

" Miriam Stanhope.

" P.S.—I am keeping all the pretty little things you gave me for old sake's sake."

The " pretty little things " included a pearl necklace that had cost him seven hundred and fifty pounds, and some diamonds whereof the pawnable value was fifteen hundred.

The first snap of cold was in the air, and she was on board the *Enchantress* on the farther side of the Bay when he got her letter. She was to winter in Ceylon. He knew all about her movements, later, and knew that he had been her dupe from the hour of their first meeting, just a year before, to the day he lost her. His love for her had been the passion of a lifetime, her liking for him had been an interlude, an " extra " in the programme of her existence.

George had had his fling. The half-world is a harder school than poverty, and Conway Field's nephew left it a changed man. All the joy in life had gone out of him. His golden days were over and all his hours were leaden —all of the same dismal colour—a dull grey.

No one but his uncle ever heard the true history of this " fling." George had no secrets from him. There was a curious sympathy between them, an understanding that had never failed. Conway understood the angry, soured young man, just as he had understood the arrogant, conceited boy. He had often advised but he had never preached. He told George that the kind of wound he had suffered was never mortal.

" You have had a lucky escape. The woman would have been the ruin of your life, and you would have hated her worse after a year of marriage as a reformed character than you hate her now for jilting you. Those stars of the half-world don't shine in the realm of virtue. They may be capable of becoming good women, but they are never the same after their reformation. The charm is gone. Your star, your creature of fire and flame is only a faded beauty, with a society manner that would be perfect if it were not just a little too precise and pedantic —a little too much prunes and prism. I have known two or three such ladies, ghostly wanderers from a world they glorified by their beauty and electrified by their wit."

"You don't know how brilliant that woman is, and how adaptable. She had not graduated in the gutter. Her pedigree was just as good as mine. She had nothing to learn and would have shone in the best society."

"You think so—and as I never saw her I can't contradict you."

Years had come and gone—more or less leaden—since the golden days; but although George had forgotten much and had learnt much, the tragedy of his youth had left him a cynic and an egoist. He still clung to Austin and believed in him, but he made no new friends, and although he kept in touch with a few of the companions of his undergraduate days, the links that held him to them were of the lightest—a good-natured toleration rather than friendship.

His mother could never feel quite happy about this adored son, because she knew that her selfish love had held him from a path in which he might have won distinction, and in her secret thoughts there was bitter regret that he should rank among the young men who had failed, while she had a shrewd suspicion that he was unhappy.

It was much to have him living at home, in which blessed privilege she was more fortunate than her sister, Selina Sedgwick, who bemoaned herself about Austin.

"My only son, and I hardly ever see him."

"Perhaps I don't see much more of George," Mrs. Bertram replied. "He spends more time with his books than with us. And though he doesn't dine out half so often as most young men, he has always an engagement of some kind when we have a party."

There came a day which seemed to Mrs. Bertram like the beginning of a new life.

George had made a sudden announcement to his father across the hearth in the smoking-room, where they sometimes sat late into the night, talking a little, and thinking a great deal, for they were both thinkers.

"If it is not too late," he said quietly, "I should like

to go to the Bar. I am beginning to tire of playing the Prodigal Son to the most indulgent of fathers, and I find the husks dry in my throat."

"Too late! At eight-and-twenty? Not a bit, my dear chap. Why, you are a lad compared with some of the men who are cramming for their exam. You have plenty of time and a fine career before you—provided you are in earnest."

"I am damnably in earnest. I want work of some kind—the harder the better."

After this all went on velvet. Seeing that this sudden fervour was not a flash in the pan, John Bertram did all that a man in his position could do to put his son in the right path. Everything was easy for the son of the famous Counsel. Solicitors beamed upon him, and it was in a solicitor's office that he got his first experience of law and equity. He worked in that office steadily for nearly a year, and passed thence to the busy pupil room of the firm's favourite junior—and at the end of two years spent over briefs and pleadings, listening in Court, and working up for the examination, was duly "called" and signed the roll of the Bar of England.

He entered his father's chambers, a fact proclaimed by the name of George Bertram in clean paint below his father's, and started to devil for the K.C. After another year of work that interested him keenly, his successful career began. The man who had devilled for J. B. was worth having as a junior in difficult cases. Bertram's only son could not help being clever. He looked older than his years, and he had what the solicitors called an imposing manner—a reserve that was almost severe, and impressed them with an idea of his value.

"Not an agreeable chap to take papers to, but safe as houses," said the common-law clerk of Colney, Colney & Carterton. "I don't much like the fellow, but he's a rising man, going to be a second J. B."

There could be no higher praise than this, and before George had been three years at the Bar, his gown was in rags, and he had established himself as one of the ablest

juniors of his day—a sound lawyer, with a good address, and occasional flashes of brilliancy.

In familiar talk he called himself his father's understudy. But he was not another J. B. He did not bubble over with cleverness, like the popular K.C. He had neither the genial temperament nor the splendid vivacity of his father; but the solicitors found that he was deep. The more obscure the case, the keener the searchlight of his finely-trained intellect. He had read his law-books with a dogged determination in the first instance, and with a keen zest as time went on, and all that was splendid in the work of the great jurists gradually revealed itself to him. He drank at the fountain of legal knowledge as eagerly as a thirsty traveller in the desert. And for the first time since a woman fooled him so heartlessly, he was able to forget the days when he had his "fling."

XIII

THE Easter Vacation had scarcely begun when George Bertram turned his back on the dusty purlieus of the law, and set his face towards the dream city that he and his cousin loved. For Conway Field had invited his nephews to spend their holiday with him at the hotel on the Riva degli Schiavoni.

"Come and cheer my lonely days. I have no acquaintances in Venice, not a man to speak to except my valet, a most estimable person, but whom I talk to as little as possible lest he should talk too much. He has been with me ten years and he has never initiated a conversation. Of course I have my reading girl who saves my sight and soothes my ear. She reads for one half the day, and far more of the night than I ought to allow. But there is no living creature so selfish as a pretty woman or a hopeles invalid. *La belle des belles* and the man with a da spine think that all created things were made for their pleasure or their comfort. I let my gentle slave exhaust herself in my service. She is young, and she will have time to be idle and happy when I am gone."

George gave his cousin this letter when they were in the Dover express, on their way to Calais for the *train de luxe*—that is to say, the train that would take them in the shortest time to Venice. Neither of them cared for the *luxe*, but the Easter Vacation is not long, and both of them had to be in London when Courts of Law and Government Offices reopened their doors.

"Read that," said George, pointing to the page that set forth Mary's merits. "It looks like infatuation. I

begin to think your people are right, and that you were not very wise when you introduced Miss Smith to the owner of Warburton House."

"Wise or not, I had to do it," Austin answered gravely. "There were two people to be benefited. I had it in my power to get the best possible reader for my uncle, and the best possible situation for a friendless young woman, of fine character, good education and good manners."

"Well, she has been a stupendous success, my mother tells me. And you are blamed all round the family for having been blind to the risk of an old man's infatuation for an attractive young woman—of unknown antecedents."

"Unknown to the family, who have no occasion to know them. I knew all about Miss Smith some time before I made her known to my uncle."

"And how much does he know of the young person's past?"

"As much as she has chosen to tell him. And before you see her I should like you to know that Mary Smith does not come into the category of young persons. She is a woman of strongly-marked character—and she is a lady."

"I will choose my words more carefully. For I see, if the enchantress has not cast her spell over my uncle, she is in a fair way of casting it over you."

Austin shrugged his shoulders and looked out of the window.

George had a profound belief in his capacity for reading character, not unnatural in a man whose power in that line had served him well. But after sitting in Danieli's *salon* on the first floor for nearly an hour at afternoon tea, while Mary Smith waited on his uncle, and joined occasionally in the general conversation, he had to confess himself baffled.

He listened while she talked; he watched her when she was silent. The voice was low and grave, and there was music in it. The articulation was perfect, the accent

refined—the accent of a woman who had been reared among gentlefolks. He had to own to himself that the voice was exquisite, and he could well understand the influence of such a woman in her capacity as reader over a lonely misanthrope like his uncle. The face? Ah, there he was at fault altogether. Was she beautiful? He remembered the Frenchman's reply to that question: "*Elle est pire.*" And he was inclined to think that there was something in Mary Smith's face that might prove more dangerous than beauty. Here, as in her voice, there was an exquisite refinement. The pale complexion and smooth dark hair, the sculptured eyelids half veiling the depth of grave grey eyes—thin lips and small round chin, long throat and shell-like ear. These were "points" if not beauty. There was nothing dazzling—no brilliancy of colour, not much light in the eyes—an expression of abiding pensiveness that just stopped short of melancholy. No, Mary Smith was not beautiful. The little boys in the street would not turn to look at her, though here and there a thoughtful man might say to himself as he went slowly past her—"That is a haunting face!"

"You fellows have been here before, I suppose," Conway said, when his nephews were leaving him, "and I dare say you think you know all about Venice."

"Every stone," answered George. "We are fed up with it."

"Very well. You shall stop at home and read to me, and Mary shall show Austin all the things you haven't seen."

"I must bow to Miss Smith's genius if she can find any unfamiliar charms, or anything new to tell us about the City of the Doges."

"She has steeped herself in the charm of Venice."

"I have read Ruskin," Mary said quietly. "That's all."

"And is his the last word? I think you have found something in Howells—in Browning—in Byron—in d'Annunzio," said Conway.

Mary blushed at the last name.

" By heaven, Becky Sharp can blush," George thought.

" I made her read some of the best bits of word-painting in ' Il Fuoco.' We skipped all the rest—only the Venetian rhapsodies, and the death of Wagner," Conway said apologetically. Then he turned to Austin.

" You will go about with Mary, and she shall teach you what you ought to admire—the churches, pictures, palaces, *out le tremblement*, and the rising barrister shall find his amusement where he likes."

" No, no. If Miss Smith scorns me, I would rather stay at home and read to you. You must have a long arrear of political and legal news, for I don't suppose Miss Smith tackles that."

" She tackles anything I want. Her patience is inexhaustible."

" I have always been fond of reading aloud," she said quietly. " It never tires me."

" Well," said Austin presently, when George and he were sitting in front of the hotel, pipe in mouth, lazily contemplative of the lagoon, and the church on the other side. " What do you think of my protégée ? "

" I think your family were right in calling you a fool. Becky Sharp was not in it with Miss Smith. She has got your uncle in her pocket, and can do just what she likes with him."

" No, George, Uncle Conway is not that kind of man. But if he were, it is all the same to me. I don't want his money."

" Of course not—neither do I—but perhaps Mary Smith does. Anyhow, two or three million sterling is worth some thought."

" In this vulgar age, when the golden calf stands on every staircase in Belgravia, and all people who go up and down kneel and worship, or if they don't kneel with their flesh and bones, they are kneeling in their hearts, and saying : " How much ? Is this new Sir Gorgias a triple or quadruple millionaire ? Will it pay us to dine with him, or to stand in the crowd at his wife's parties ? "

" You can afford to talk like that," said George, refilling his pipe. " You are not a busy barrister, but a sleepy old barnacle, and your only use for big money would be to let it dribble out of your pocket in the East End."

" Be easy in your mind, George. Mary is not scheming for the big money."

" Perhaps she knows the wiser way, and will get it without scheming."

Austin was too angry to answer, and left him alone in front of the golden water.

George filled his pipe for the third time since tea. He sat staring at the shining plane between the Riva and the great church of his saintly namesake.

" I hate an inscrutable woman," he muttered to himself, " and I hate a woman with a past."

He had suffered by a woman with a past, and the old wound ached even yet, quite enough to make him suspicious of every woman whose young life was not an open page, offering itself to every scrutinizer. The bread-and-butter miss, smelling of the schoolroom, was now his ideal. And unfortunately whenever he met the ideal she bored him to extinction. That is why he told himself that he had done with women, and laid out his life in pathways where women never trod. He had never forgotten that mistake of ten years ago. He had been won by matchless beauty, by a charm so thrilling that nothing counted before that first meeting in the dancing-room at the " Gilded Lily "—the young men's club of a dead-and-gone day—the club which offered all-night dances and a liberal education in fast life.

He was sorry that he had met this peerless creature in that Bohemian atmosphere, where the scent of hot-house flowers was poisoned by the reek of cigar smoke, where audacious necks glittered with Parisian diamonds and Oriental eyelids drooped under the weight of the paint that blackened them.

Miriam had shone like a star among the painted herd, in the pristine freshness of her beauty—so utterly unlike the rest that he believed her pure. She was there by an

accident, he thought. Some scoundrel had lied to her about the place, and had persuaded her to come.

She was waltzing with a boy he had known as an undergraduate at Merton, and he made the boy introduce him to her. Her voice was low and sweet, her manner perfect. There was nothing to disenchant or to repel. It shocked him that she should be in that place ; but in herself there was nothing that could shock. They sat talking for half an hour on a wide landing, just outside the crowd going down to supper, and the crowd going back to the dancing-room.

She refused supper. She was going home almost immediately.

" I think this must be the first time you have been here," he said.

" No, I come here often. I am fond of waltzing, and one meets good dancers—and the people amuse me. I lead a solitary life, you see, and I like a scene that takes one out of oneself." She spoke simply and naturally, as if there were no occasion for apologies.

" I like your young friend, the Oxonian. He told me funny stories about the 'Varsity and the queer old dons, and the bear-fights."

After this George asked if he might call upon her.

Yes, he might call.

" To-morrow ? "

" Yes, come to tea to-morrow. I live in St. Patrick's Grove, just off the Brompton Road—Number 12. I have a sweet little house, with a wee garden that I love. But they are going to sweep it away next year, to make room for a pile of flats."

He was at the sweet little house in St. Patrick's Grove sometimes, often, always. He was in Circe's Cave. Men warned him, and he hated their officiousness.

She had told him her version of the past, sobbing, with her eyes hidden against his breast. It was a commonplace story of seduction—a pure and cloudless girlhood spoilt by a heartless egoist—a brief year of spurious pleasures—desertion—desolation

"I am quite alone in the world—quite alone," she moaned. "Only a woman knows what that means."

There was no more loneliness for Mrs. Stanhope after this. George Bertram gave himself up to her body and soul, lived only to make her happy. He took her to Paris, Switzerland, to the Italian lakes, Florence, to Rome. Wherever her fancy led they went. She was easily bored, and he soon found that a solitude *à deux* would not satisfy her. Yet, with a singular want of understanding, he thought that to marry her would make her a new woman.

George had come to Venice with a bag full of briefs, and he meant to work hard in that reposeful city. Too reposeful—for there was a perilous softness in the air that breathed between the hills and the sea, a too slumberous note in the cry of the gondoliers and the swish of their oars through placid wavelets as they slid under the edge of the quay, past the big hotel. It was difficult to resist the charm, to stick with dogged elbows on his writing-table in the ogee window on the third floor, and not to look out into the soft light across to the great church on the other side of the lagoon. He fought with the devil of lassitude, such an insinuating irresistible fiend, and stuck hard to the uninviting task, the labyrinthine gloom of a Chancery suit, covering page after page of shining foolscap, that seemed too preposterously dull to pore over within the sound of silver bells, and the wish-wash of water.

He read from the seven o'clock coffee and rolls to the bells of noon, when Austin's sharp rap at his door brought a delicious sense of relief.

"My dear fellow, have you forgotten that your uncle wanted us to go to Torcello with him, and eat our luncheon in the gondola?"

"You and I, my uncle and Miss Smith—no, I had not forgotten. I suppose the inevitable Smith is to be of our party?"

"Mary is inevitable wherever your uncle is going."

" And one is to take her for granted, like his eyeglasses, and his newspaper. Poor thing ! "

" You needn't pity her. She is quite satisfied with her life—even happy."

" In anticipation of the superior life she will lead by and by when the dear old man has left her a handsome slice of his two or three millions."

" Drop that, George. It is bad enough for the women of the family to be full of mean thoughts. Don't let us imitate them."

" My mind is only human, Austin, and I can but think as all the world would think in the circumstances. That the young lady's exquisite placidity in a situation that would be impossible to the average girl is entirely without *arrière-pensée* transcends my power of belief."

" Well, get your panama and come downstairs. No matter what you think so long as you are civil. Don't keep an old man and a young lady waiting. The gondola is at the side door, and my uncle is being carried down the steps."

" Keep him waiting, poor martyr. Not for the world ! " cried George, as he ran downstairs after his cousin.

XIV

THAT little voyage to Torcello in the soft April noontide was a blissful interlude in the dull grey of humdrum lives. George gave himself up to the charm of the hour. He let the magic of the time hold him. He ceased to think. He only lived.

That picture of the gondola with the strange figure of the broken man, supine upon his adaptable couch, a work of infinite art and ingenuity, his head supported by carefully adjusted cushions, and his eyes looking dreamily across the blue water to the deeper blue of the horizon, and of the pale, delicately-featured girl sitting beside him, watchful of every change in his face and every movement of the beautiful attenuated hands, was something not easily to be forgotten even by the man who looked at it with the cynic's deep-rooted belief that most women are worthless, and most men are fools.

That his uncle was in the toils of a modern and more subtle Becky Sharp was an opinion that had been too long current in his family to be easily dismissed. Given the circumstances, what else could she be ?

It was a long and restful day, monotonous and slow—a day on which nothing was expected to happen. The gondola was moored within the shadow of the cathedral, and George, who knew the island by heart, went alone to look at the wonderful Madonna, while Austin helped Mr. Field's valet to unpack and arrange the luncheon on the folding table in front of his uncle's couch. There were other folding tables, and everyone was to eat and drink at ease in the calm, unhurrying day.

The meal was long and gave ample scope for conversation, for Mr. Field ate slowly and consumed so little of the delicate food and the bright sparkling wine as to make both his nephews ashamed of their healthy appetites.

When the last trace of luncheon had been swept away and the fragments distributed among the school-children who came to stare, Field ordered Austin to take Mary round the island.

"You are to show her everything," he commanded, "everything! And you are to tell her all you know about the history of the place. And you are not to hurry her, as I may want her to talk to me about Torcello in one of my white nights. She has read all the books she could get hold of, and I dare say she knows more than you, but it will do you both good to talk about it. George can stay with me and read yesterday's *Times*—everything except the leading articles, which always make me angry."

"Because they don't jump with your politics?" George asked.

"Because I remember what a *Times* leader was like when Delane was at the helm. Something to make a fellow think. Ichabod! Ichabod! And now we have leaders on 'Suburban Gardens' or 'Spinsters and Curates,' mild facetiousness even, where the Thunderer used to roar. It is hard lines to grow old, my friends—labour and sorrow, memory and regret, that is what those late years mean for most of us."

The young men listened with sympathy and understanding. They thought it was good for this victim of fate to grumble. He was never known to complain of physical ills, but bore pain and helplessness with the impassibility of a stoic. Only by some sudden contraction of the brow, some nervous movement of the thin lips, did his friends know of the wave of pain, the revolt against fate. If it were a solace to dwell upon the greatness of the past, and to enlarge with open scorn upon the deterioration of the present, it was not for the young and strong to grudge him that poor relief. For them the Present was all in all, for him only the Past was alive—the world he had known

before the great axe fell and cut him off from the life that includes joy and hope.

Austin took charge of Mary Smith, and they moved slowly over the coarse rank grass through the sunshine. Mary knew they were walking above the foundations of a city that had been populous and splendid, convents, palaces, churches, the mother city of Venice, of which nothing was left but the cathedral, gaunt and grim in its stone severity, which Time had spared, and the Museum full of relics and vestiges that modern intelligence has garnered.

Austin told Mary all he knew about Torcello, only to find that she knew more. His uncle had talked to her, and his uncle's conversation was always exhaustive. There was nothing left for any other speaker to finish where he had begun. A man with a marvellous memory, and an insatiable appetite for knowledge. Since that last fatal ride there was nothing left for him but to know. He took up one subject after another, and he found that world of books inexhaustible, so that he, for whom life without them must have been a burden, found the time too short.

"You are really wonderful," Austin told Mary after they had turned the story of Torcello inside out. "My uncle was curiously lucky in finding such companionship for his sad years."

"I hope they are not very sad. I think the slow, monotonous life has grown his second nature, and that if some good fairy were to wave a wand and make him a strong man again, he would hardly know what to do with his days."

She stopped suddenly.

"I forgot. Yes, I know what he would do. He would send for the best horse that could be got, mount and ride away."

"Surely the mere idea of a horse must be loathsome to him."

"No. I have seen him look at horses in the Park, and his face light up at the sight of a beautiful beast.

He has never spoken to me of his accident, without regretting that the horse was killed, the finest he had ever had."

"Well, Mary, what do you think of my cousin George?"

"I have seen very little of him."

"Enough to have an opinion."

"I think he has a clever face."

"And a bad manner?"

"Certainly not a pleasant manner."

"Pleasant is out of the question where George is concerned. He prefers being unpleasant. You must know that he is a cynic; he got his heart put out of gear—I won't say broken—by a worthless woman when he was young and saw this world *couleur de rose*, and now he sees nothing anywhere but the colour of lead. Man delights him not, nor woman neither, but he enjoys his successes in the Law Courts, and he will go into Parliament by and by when the House of Commons is a place for a gentleman. Then he will go on and on—will be made a judge, and will marry a rich commonplace widow, or a young sprig of nobility with a courtesy title, and a long list of useful relations, linking him with all the important people."

They had several such days before the cousins went back to London—long reposeful days on the islands and on the mainland, exploring every spot of interest to which Conway Field could be carried over the quiet water. They had just a week of perfect weather, broken only by a tremendous thunderstorm which came one night while they were at dinner, a tempest so appalling that they could only sit pale and silent, waiting for the culminating crash and the gradual diminuendo as the storm rolled slowly away to Padua or Verona.

George spent the early morning over his briefs—sprang out of bed at seven in order to give himself plenty of time for bath and breakfast and work, before the gondola was waiting at the bottom of the steps in the narrow side street. Only once in those six days had his uncle occasion to say that he was almost waiting. He wondered at the young man's alacrity for a stereotyped excursion.

"I thought our mornings would have bored you, since you knew Venice by heart."

"Ten years ago? Yes, but I am old and serious now, and I see things with other eyes. Ten years ago Venice meant curiosity, excitement, a feverish desire to see things that were fresh and strange. Now she means rest —the *dolce far*—waking dreams—long thoughts. I shall fall asleep in Court in the midst of some tedious case and dream myself back in this gondola, and hear the plash of oars and the ripple of water."

Austin watched him as he spoke, and saw that his eyes were on Mary's face, grave and quiet in the clear light, a face that told nothing.

This was their last day, and the last evening was saddened by a sudden attack of pain which sent Mr. Field to his room, where Mary followed him half an hour later. The valet had come for her. His master was a little easier now, he was lying down, and would she read to him?

She went quickly, with a brief good-night to the young men who were playing piquet by the wood fire.

"We shall be here when you come back," Austin said.

"I think not. He may like me to read for some hours."

"What is the book?" George asked, thinking the next moment, "What an imbecile question! As if it mattered —as if anything mattered about her!"

"'The Bride of Lammermoor.' We are going through Scott in the bad nights."

"Making them worse, I should think," George said, with a short angry laugh, as the door shut behind her.

"All true lovers of Scott read his best novels once a year," said Austin quietly, as if it were an interesting fact.

George threw the cards into the fire, and half a dozen sovereigns on to the table.

Austin pushed the gold back to the loser.

"I won't take your money; you have been playing vilely, and your thoughts must have been miles away."

"I wish they had been. They were all in this room.

Come for a walk, Austin, and take my dirty coin for your East-enders. I shall suffocate if I am here another minute. Come to the piazza and the narrow streets, and let me walk down the demon that is in me."

"Hadn't you better do that alone?"

"No—I want you. There is something you can tell me—and you'll have to do it."

Austin laughed, but it was good-natured laughter, as a father laughs at his spoilt child. He pulled back the heavy brocade curtain, and the moonlight poured into the room.

"Yes, it's wicked to be indoors on such a night."

The quay of the slaves was alive with people when they went out, noisy happy people, and the twang of the Cockney tourist was mixed with the soft Venetian dialect, with French, and still more with German. The place in this mild May-time was the playground of Europe. To be there—only to be there was to be happy!

They got themselves away from that over-exuberant happiness as fast as their legs could carry them, crossing the piazza where the great clock was striking ten, George leading, piercing the narrow calle, cleaving their way through the crowd till they came to a quiet spot amidst the tangle of streets and bridges and hidden water, a spot where there was a broad flight of steps in front of a tall brick church that very few tourists came to look at, though there were treasures of art inside, as there are everywhere in the wonderful city. Here George threw himself down upon the highest of the steps and bade his cousin sit beside him.

"We can smoke the dear old man's cigars in quiet on these stones," he said. "Come, we can talk freely here—not a soul who understands our tongue within earshot. Now, you have got to tell me all you know about that woman."

"Meaning Mary Smith?"

"Meaning the woman who calls herself Mary Smith. You will have to tell me——"

"Just as much as I think I have the right to tell, and

not a syllable more. Why do you want to know? You see her here happy and useful. What else matters? She is nothing to you—never can be anything more to you than your uncle's reading girl. He has had several reading girls whom you must have seen from time to time—failures, all of them. Why should you rage furiously about this one?"

"Because she interests me—because she is a mystery. Becky Sharp *in excelsis*, and you know how interesting Becky is even now, when she is more than half a century old."

"Mary belongs to another type. Why trouble yourself about her?"

"Because if she is not an adventuress she is a witch, and she has cast her spell. You see I am frank. I ought to have gone away after that first day in the gondola—Venice—the languid water—the long hours in air that is like a caress—I ought to have gone away. Be kind, Austin. You know what my life has been, and how badly I was treated. I began to be old and hard at three-and-twenty. You know what a woman did for me—I believed in her—would have sold my soul for her—afterwards I swore that I would never believe again, and that if I ever gave a piece of my heart to a woman she should be pure and spotless—conventional—Philistine, if you like, but impeccable—the kind of woman who can't go wrong, who doesn't know what sin means."

"Wait till you meet her. There are plenty of such perfect women in the world, and leave Mary untroubled by your caprice. She is happy—leave her alone."

"Not till I know what she has been—whether she is a bit of soulless propriety, or a woman who has been down into the depths and is acting a part."

"She is not acting. I will tell you as much as that. She has been through deep waters. She has suffered and grieved."

"I don't want a woman who has been rescued."

"Then you don't want Mary Smith."

"She has been rescued? God, how I hate the word!"

"Yes. She has been rescued—from starvation—or perhaps the river—but not from the way of sinners."

"Tell me that she is pure, that no man lives who can say she has belonged to him."

"I will not tell you that."

"Then she is no wife for me. I won't try that experiment a second time."

"You are wise, George. It was an unlucky experiment for you. But this at least I will tell you, that Mary is as wide as the poles asunder from the woman who tricked you. There is not a thought in common between them."

"But she is somebody's leavings. She has belonged to a man who was not her husband."

"She has belonged to a man who lied to her—who stole her from her home before she was eighteen."

"They all say that."

"I know it is true."

"On what evidence?"

"On the evidence of character. I know Mary."

"Well, say it's true—say I believe your character-reading. The girl who could be lured by a seducer is not for me. She may have bewitched me, but I can break the spell."

"I don't think she has troubled herself, or is likely to trouble herself about you. She has suffered greatly through trusting one man, and I don't believe she will ever trust, much less care for, another. She is a woman who can be happy without admirers and without a lover."

"And some day the man will come back and want her again. Do you know where he is and what he is doing?"

"Neither she nor I know anything about him."

"Did he leave her to marry someone else?"

"No. He was married when he found her. If not he would have married her, or at least he told her so."

"And you believe in sweet simplicity that knows nothing of the world's ways, and takes her lover's hand and walks away from home with him—without waiting for banns or bridesmaids? I don't."

"Nobody asks you to believe. All Mary wants is to be let alone."

George flung away his half-smoked cigar in a rage, and the little spark of red fire skimmed over the moonlit pavement below them like a lost glow-worm.

"Look here, Austin," he said with sudden fierceness, "you might as well show your cards. You are in love with this girl. Every word you have said this night is a plain avowal. You are passionately in love with her, and will end by taking her to church with my uncle's blessing and half his fortune, and you'll have your sisters as bridesmaids, and the congratulations of the whole family—except my mother."

"If you choose to talk nonsense I can't prevent you," Austin answered with a splendid carelessness. "Hark! there's the first of the clocks striking twelve. They'll have shut us out if we don't make haste back."

He went down the steps and George had no choice but to follow him in the solemn striking of many clocks.

They were both to leave Venice next morning.

XV

IT was a quarter of a year later and Conway Field and the reading girl were in Hampshire in the drowsy heat of a fine August. The splash of the fountain was a welcome sound in the long sultry afternoons when Mary sat reading to her employer in the shade of a pollarded Spanish chestnut that made a tent of foliage under which twenty people had sometimes sat at luncheon in the good days before Conway's accident.

There were no luncheon parties, or domestic gatherings now, and the country people who had called upon the invalid had been received so coldly that they were not likely to come again. Only the Vicar of the parish had been welcomed with any semblance of cordiality. But he was a man in a thousand—a fine scholar, who never obtruded his scholarship, a humorist, and a man in whom the humdrum duties of parochial life in a small agricultural community had not extinguished the joy of life. As parsons go he was a rich man, and could afford to live the kind of life he liked, far from the madding crowd, with the wife he loved, who was in perfect sympathy with all his tastes and inclinations. Like him, she had a keen intellect and a strong sense of humour, and, like him, she loved her garden and her horses, her old-English china, and all the charm and comeliness of an ideal vicarage.

"Mr. Ullathorn may come as often as he likes," Conway told Mary. "He never bores me. And, though he has a capacity for taking legends and mysteries on trust that I never had, I believe he is sincere, and I know he is benevolent, and a power for good in the village community."

For Mary the Ullathorns were always a cheerful presence that lifted her a little way out of the abiding sadness of her surroundings. Perhaps Conway Field understood this, for he would often suggest a visit to the vicarage, where she had been begged to run in and out as her fancy suggested.

"I love to have young pretty creatures about me, my dear," Mrs. Ullathorn said. "I love to talk of their frocks and their hats, and all the frivolities Marmaduke laughs at. And they let me talk of my servants and the village twaddle—the scandals and pettinesses that make one almost hate one's fellow-creatures."

"Almost hating" was the farthest Elizabeth Ullathorn could go in that line. For the most part she could only wonder at other people's ill-nature.

They had not been very long at Madingley when Mr. Field received a letter from George Bertram.

"Cool!" he said, passing the letter over to Mary after reading it.

"My dear Uncle,—The courts are up and I have the dreary desert of the Vacation yawning in front of me. I shan't go far afield this year. I am heartily sick of abroad. Luckily I have work to get through that wouldn't fit in with through trains to Rome or Vienna, and nothing calls me out of England. May I come to you at Madingley and stay just as long as I can without being a bore? The first morning you feel you have had enough of me you will tell me so with the candour of a blood relation, and I will disappear before the afternoon; but in the meantime, so long as I am not matter in the wrong place, Madingley will suit me down to the ground for two or three toughish jobs I have on hand. I worked pretty hard in my sky parlour at Danieli's, but the very atmosphere of Venice is a distraction, and I know I could work better at Madingley."

"Shall we let him come, Mary?"

"Why not?—if you are sure he won't bore you."

"How can we ever be sure of that? I dare say he will get on my nerves now and then, as the flies do in the garden, but after all he is a good fellow, and I was always fond of him. He has suffered and I hope he is strong. Let him come, Mary. Perhaps he will amuse us both, though there has not been much gaiety about him since that Stanhope woman jilted him. Let him come. There are rooms enough and to spare in the corridor."

Mr. Field had told her the story of George's discomfiture before he came to Venice.

"For a proud young man to have brought himself to marry a damaged lady, and for the damaged lady to chuck him, is a bit of a shock," he said. "George has never got over it. He looks on all your sex with a jaundiced eye. But except in the matter of ordering dinner you need not give him a thought."

Drayson the butler was at Madingley, but not Mrs. Tredgold. That superior person being left in charge of Warburton House, where she received curates at afternoon tea with all the air and authority of mistress, not forgetting to tell them in confidence of her master's absurd infatuation for a young person picked out of the gutter.

XVI

GEORGE BERTRAM had spent three months of his life in trying not to think of Mary Smith. He had worked like a tiger at his cases, and astonished even the solicitors who believed in him. He had been to all the big music-halls where strange women who danced amazing dances or sang amazing songs were to be seen and heard. He had listened and looked and had come away thinking the show hateful, and wishing that all the strange women had one neck that he could wring. He had gone to parties among his father and mother's friends, which he hated even worse, though his parents assured him they were of a superior quality. He had done all these things—and at the end of Term he had to confess to himself that his passion for a nameless and possibly disreputable woman was a disease past cure.

Little as he knew of her, he knew at least that she was a woman he could not marry, as much outside the pale as the woman who lived in St. Patrick's Grove, and danced at the "Gilded Lily." He could not marry her, but he could not do without her. His folly must go on to the bitter end. He could not marry her, but he was sick for love of her, and he would give himself to her body and soul if she would have him. He would give her all his years to come, all his prospects, all his hopes, and swear eternal fidelity to her—order his life as she pleased—go to the other end of the world with her—chuck the Bar—break his mother's heart—offend his uncle beyond the possibility of pardon by wilfully taking from him the creature who ministered to his comfort, and almost made him happy

All this he would do for Mary Smith: act idiotically —wickedly—but he would not marry her. There, he told himself, he was adamant.

Would she on her part insist on marriage—stand out for the letter of that law which the modern woman treats so lightly? He thought not.

"If I can make her love me, I can make her come to me," he told himself. "She gave herself in the freshness of her youth—God! how lovely she must have been—to a scoundrel who deserted her. Surely she will give herself to me!"

"If I can make her love me!" That was what the thud of the labouring engine kept saying as he sat alone in a first-class compartment of the Southampton express on his way to Madingley, alone through bribery and corruption—briefs scattered on the seat in front of him. "If I can make her, if I can make her love me!" said the engine.

A harder task, perhaps, than that difficult case of Prior and others *versus* Withacomb, on which a quarter of a million depended.

What battles—silent battles between brain and heart—this man had been fighting since that night in Venice—since he sat upon the steps of the church bathed in moonlight, and extorted Mary's piteous secret from his reluctant cousin. In how many aspects he had pictured her. Now as a spotless victim, fallen from woman's high estate —fallen, but still pure. As he visualized her thus it seemed to him that he might make her his wife and be proud to have won her, proud to show her to his world. This calm perfection, this exquisite refinement might challenge society, none should find a flaw in the gem with which he had crowned his life.

The crown of his life! Viewed in this aspect, it was thus he thought of her. But this transcendental fit did not last long. He had but to remember what that other woman had been to him—in his hot youth—the dupe of a beautiful face. He looked back and knew that she was worthless, trivial, mercenary, selfish to the core of her

heart. And was he to be tricked again just because this woman had better manners, a finer mind, and the indications of better birth and breeding? When he believed in Miriam Stanhope he had thought her a lady. Steeped in the magic of a passionate love, he had believed whatever the enchantress chose to tell him, and it was not until a year after she jilted him, a year of brooding and embittered thoughts, that he remembered how little those various details of her romantic past fitted into the broad lines of her story, and how impossible most of them were.

He would have sacrificed his name and prospects in life to Miriam. Fate had been kind and saved him, in spite of himself. And now at thirty-two he was almost as weak as he had been at twenty-one, and ready to fall at the feet of an adventuress whom his mother's family hated.

"I will win her at my own price, or cut her out of my heart," he told himself, as the car shot along the rural road between hedgerows where the ragged robin was rosy red against the dark-green splendour of beech boughs.

Most men have the defects of their qualities. One of George Bertram's finest qualities, the quality that might lead him to distinction, was concentration. But there are times when a virtue becomes a vice. And, when passion rules the man with the faculty of concentration, heaven knows where it may lead him. Be the purpose that absorbs him for good or for evil, he cannot let it go. All the strength of his mind is fixed upon a point, waking or sleeping, in company or in solitude, his thoughts are driving him upon a single line, a single desire rules his mind. He broods upon his purpose with a bulldog tenacity. He can find neither comfort nor rest, but in the assurance that long or late he will win the thing he wants.

George Bertram had never run after women. Love with him had never taken the loose Horatian aspect: Lydia of the many flames to-day, the tempestive Chloë to-morrow. He had never been trivial or fickle in his

ideas of the sex. He was a man whom a disreputable marriage would have ruined for life. Having escaped that danger, and having, as he believed, protected himself with triple armour against the possibility of being ever again caught in the toils, the knowledge that he had been caught exasperated him to madness. He raged with a sullen fury against this new Delilah, whose thoughtful eyes and tranquil lips and far-off manner had attracted him by their aloofness rather than by a superior beauty. No, she was not as handsome as Miriam Stanhope—not as handsome as many women he had seen and passed by, since Miriam jilted him, but she was wonderful somehow. The charm by which she had caught him was her mystery.

The poodle came to meet him half an hour after his arrival, when he strolled across the grass to the leafy tent where Conway Field and his reader were having tea. The magnificent black beast came sauntering towards the new arrival, sniffed curiously at his legs, and trotted away in disgust. Here was a man who liked dogs, perhaps, but who didn't keep a dog, a man, therefore, with whom no dog could at once be in sympathy, for however they may be disposed to fight each other, no proper-minded dog can take to the dogless man.

Mr. Field gave his nephew a cordial greeting.

"I'm afraid you must have thought me a trifle cheeky for inviting myself to your country retreat, but I really was at a loose end, and it was no good going to any of my father's friends, for they would have done anything for me except let me work. I knew there was plenty of room here and that I need not bore you."

"My dear fellow, I am delighted to have you. You will bring me a little of the dark and bright from the world I have done with. We will talk of famous probate cases, which always interest me, and at which I know you are a dab. I suppose we shall have you a judge in the divorce court before your hair is grey, and you will be loosening the intolerable chains, and setting husbands and wives free from an initial mistake to take still heavier

fetters. I don't find that either the divorced wives or the divorced husbands seem to do much better with their second ventures."

"*C'est selon*," George said with a shrug.

He had been looking at Mary while his uncle was talking. She had received him with no more animation than if he had been the village mechanic come to wind the clocks. She would have been much more interested in the head-gardener.

Her thin white hands were moving gently over Zamiel's head and ears, caressing the softness of the curly black hair. Her eyelids had drooped under George's earnest gaze, but there was not the faintest blush—only the natural avoidance of a too persistent look.

"I hope you like your sitting-room," she said at last.

"It is utterly delightful. Were you kind enough to choose it for me?"

"No. Mrs. Moffatt arranged everything. She knows what is wanted by instinct."

"Admirable woman! But I think you put those roses on the writing-table."

"It is always a pleasure to handle flowers. I'm afraid that is the only useful work I do at Madingley."

"Except making a crusty old man happy," muttered Mr. Field.

Mary was at his side pouring out his tea in the next minute, George watching her intently, as she attended to every detail that made for the invalid's comfort. It was not till all was done that she turned to the visitor. There was no uncivil neglect or indifference, only a manner that seemed to say: "There is one person to be considered here, and his claims are paramount."

"Is this all acting, or is she really fond of him?" George asked himself. Why should she not be fond of so kind a friend? Any womanly woman would be touched by so sad a fate, so calmly endured. Affection would be the natural result of pity. Only from affection could come the delicate attention, the watchful yet unobtrusive care which this reading girl gave her master.

Conway had been lying half asleep among his pillows when George arrived, but now Mary and the footman had manipulated his wonderful couch, which was as adaptable as a living thing, and he was sitting up with a table in front of him, ready for a long talk with the new arrival.

"Well, George, you come from the heart of things, from the central point and focus of this earth, as every Englishman considers London, and I expect you to amuse me."

"I'm afraid I am rather an unamusing person. If you read the papers every day they will have told you all that is worth knowing."

"The papers are very good in their way and they help to keep me alive. But a young man who goes about London knows a good deal more than one finds in a newspaper. If you are not witty yourself you can tell me the good things you have heard at great men's tables—the new ideas—the paradoxes—the stinging criticisms—the bitter speeches from good haters—the new nickname for our political opponents—the little malignant touches—the shrewd prophecies—the bows drawn at a venture. You can be amusing if you are not too conceited to give me the skimming of other men's brains."

George laughed and obeyed. Mary thought that only a clever man could have talked to order as well as he did. She listened with evident interest, and always laughed in the right place. But after she had given George his second cup of tea, and done all that the invalid wanted for his comfort, she went quietly away with Zamiel, whose forepaw had been pulling her arm for most of the time, first for a biscuit and next even more persistently for a walk.

George watched girl and dog as they went quickly through sunshine and shadow—watched them till they vanished in the leafy distance.

"Miss Smith seems to enjoy your *villeggiatura*," George said when they were gone.

"Yes, she loves the garden and the wood, and even the

village and the school-children, and my vicar and his amiable wife."

"You have made her very happy."

"Yes, I believe she is happy. And in a life so useless as mine it is something to have made one woman and one dog happy. Mary had not a very happy girlhood, though she made the best of it, and contrived to take pleasure in rather gloomy surroundings."

George flushed, and his eyes brightened. "Now I shall hear something," he thought.

"Were her people unkind, or poor, or disreputable?"

"She had no people. Her mother died when she was a child, and her father's sorrow for his wife made him hard to the motherless girl. He educated her in a casual, haphazard way, and, being a fine scholar, brought her up in a little world of books. She spent hours reading to him just as she has read to me. She grew up with no companions but fishermen's wives and dogs, and no friend but the parson's wife. But she loved the village children and the village dogs and the moor and the sea. And so she got through her young years somehow."

"Then her father was a gentleman?"

"Could you doubt it, seeing what she is?"

George was silent. "Women are so clever," he muttered at last.

"Not clever enough to take the stamp of refinement upon common clay. Mary's father was a scholar—dry-as-dust, perhaps—a quarterly reviewer, grinding out exhaustive articles on dull books to make his bread. I doubt if he was kind to Mary, but he gave her the love of books, and that is something precious for a woman to carry through this barren life. It helps her to forget what life is."

George went for a long walk after waiting some time in the hope that his uncle would go on talking about Mary, but the poodle came bounding across the grass with his neck ribbon all awry, looking almost disreputable after his run in the wood, and Mary came quietly after him, to resume her post beside her master's chair, while his

valet and the strongest of the footmen conveyed him back to the house.

"You'll have to dine alone here, George, unless you would like me to invite the vicar and his wife. They are the only people I foregather with."

"I would much rather be alone, and think over my work."

He dared not ask where Mary was to dine. His mother had told him that in Warburton House she was supposed to dine with the housekeeper, but for the most part had eaten her light evening meal in one of Mr. Field's rooms. A fact that Mrs. Tredgold expatiated upon to dear Mrs. Bertram as at once an insult to herself as a lady, and an offence to her sense of propriety as a vicar's widow. He had seen enough of his uncle's relations with the reading girl in Venice and at Madingley, to be sure that she was safe from the slightest suggestion of servitude. The petty slights and negligences that a lady-help might have to bear in a semi-detached suburban villa would never touch Mary Smith.

"Come into the wood, Mary," George said, after standing patiently in the afternoon sun to admire wonderful flower-beds. "I am fed up with your garden. It is perfect—a banquet table of colour—your pyramids of roses, your rich carpets of violas, your tall heliotropes. But I don't want to stand in the sun and feast upon roses and lilies. Zamiel and I have quicksilver in our veins as well as blood, and we want the freedom of mossy glades between beeches and oaks. The poodle is pining to run and leap and scratch and dig and make believe he is hunting. Come along, Mary. My uncle has given you an hour's leave."

An hour's holiday! George had fallen into the way of counting the minutes in that too brief space of time. He would look furtively at his watch as they strolled side by side in the wood, or dawdled in the garden. It was the only time they were ever alone together. For the greater part of the day she was in close companionship

with Mr. Field, or, if not, she was secluded in her own room from which he could never tempt her.

"What do you do in your den?" he asked impatiently one day, when she refused to go for a walk with him in the morning hours that the invalid was in the hands of Ridley. "Are you like the common run of women? Do you scribble everlasting letters?"

"I have only one correspondent—your cousin Austin—and he is too busy to be plagued with long letters from me."

"Then are you burying your nose in some preposterous fancy work, bent double over an embroidery frame?"

"No. I like making extracts from any book I have been reading to your uncle. Passages that are worth thinking over."

He called her Mary. It had come about so naturally that she hardly knew when it had happened. He had not asked her permission or even remarked on the ugliness of "Miss Smith," but had just called her Mary, and in his fine voice that name had a melodious sound.

"I take it, you have been fed upon books till they are your natural pabulum."

"I began early. I had nothing but books when I was a child."

"Your father was a student—a reviewer. My uncle told me."

"Yes."

He thought to lead her on to talk of those young days, but she disappointed him.

She called Zamiel, and that always meant a change in the conversation. The poodle was a full stop.

"I think I shall call that beast Punctum," George said. "It is his proper name."

He was fond of the poodle, fond with a foolish fondness, whereof he was ashamed. All dogs were dear to him; even the abject cur in the street was an object of heart-aching pity, if not of love. But this dog was more precious than any other four-legged beast that walked the earth. This dog was an animal of another species—not *a* dog, but *her* dog, and Zamiel knew he was beloved, and in less

than a week had attached himself to the strange strong man with a fervour of affection that his doting mistress had hardly won from him.

Those half-hour strolls in the wood were walks in Paradise. Do what he would, they had never more than half an hour, for the first thirty minutes had been wasted somehow before they started—looking for a book, or losing and finding Zamiel, or answering a little note from the rector's wife. George complained of this dawdling.

"We have never got to the end of the wood," he grumbled, "and you have never shown me that pool which you said I ought to sketch. Why can't you beg a two-hours' holiday some day when Uncle Conway is in a sweet temper, and take me to your pretty spot, and sit beside me and help me with your ideas, while I do a lightning sketch."

"*Pas possible!* I have one thing to do at Madingley, and that is to make your uncle as happy as I can."

"And you make Zamiel happy. You make a slave of yourself for those two, and I am left out in the cold."

She never noticed speeches of this kind, though there were many such in a day. She never reproved or protested. She ignored everything that she did not want to hear.

"She treats me shamefully," he said to himself often, in his long thoughts of her. "She is a prude and a prig. She has fed upon books, and a bookworm's company, till she has not one drop of warm blood in her veins. A man with a heart that can beat hard has no right to think of her, and yet here am I, the most abject ass in Christendom, thinking and fretting about her all the summer day—and sometimes all a sleepless night."

And yet—and yet—oh, strange anomaly, he was happy. Fretting and fuming, fretting and fuming, wondering and tormenting himself all day long, and yet happier than he had ever been before, happier than in the golden days, when he was moving through some of the loveliest scenes upon this earth with the loveliest woman he had ever met, happier than in those golden nights beside the Lake at Cadenabbia, or face to face with the Jungfrau range upon

the hill above Lake Thun, when the atmosphere was made of moonlight and impassioned love.

He knew that this was love of a better quality—calmer, sweeter, wiser—love that meant happiness—love that he might talk of with his mother and not be ashamed.

He had been at Madingley less than a month—and yet the time in which he had vowed to himself that he would win this woman and at his own price seemed as far away as if he had been spending his days with her for a year.

Mary Smith—so grave, so placid, so unemotional—had worked a miracle. He was happy—that was all; but it seemed to him in somewise miraculous. He was happier than he had ever been since Mrs. Stanhope jilted him. He was happier than he had been when she was his; so beautiful a creature that wherever she appeared men worshipped and wondered. Waiters, boatmen, road-sweepers, fly-drivers, custodians of old grey churches, surprised by that vision of warm beauty in the dim light—beauty as perfect as the Madonna over the Altar; they had all bowed down, and she had been full of joyous life—the wine that bubbled in the glass set her babbling. Such a companion when she was in the humour: not caring much about old churches, unless they were "funny," like the church where the dead monks sat round, as if in solemn conclave—not caring about scenery, lakes or mountains; much preferring jewellers' shops, or windows in which there were hats for her to choose from. No, he had not been as happy with Miriam in the loveliest scenes of Europe, pouring out his money like water, as he was sauntering day after day in the same little bit of woodland, sitting at tea in the same garden, talking with his uncle and Mary, or listening and pretending to sketch while the girl went on with the poem with which she had read the old man to sleep after luncheon. It might be something he knew by heart, like "Maud" or "In Memoriam," or it might be something more obscure of Browning's "Balaustion's Adventure," or "The Ring and the Book," or graver prose—

Jowett's translation of Plato, the Apology, or the Phaedo. Whatever she read, the voice was sweet and sympathetic, and there was just enough expression, and never a touch of the theatrical; nothing to call attention to the reader rather than to the thing she read.

The middle weeks of September had been as August, and although he saw the newspapers every morning and dated his letters properly, it was a shock to him when the tea-table was moved from the garden to the drawing-room at the first breath of autumn in the air, and he realized that October had begun. As long as he could write September at the top of a letter he had taken little heed of time—had lived in a Paradise where there was no such thing. But now he had written "October the first" he began to count the days—only twelve—nay, only ten days. For he must be in London on the eleventh at latest.

Already his father had written a reminding letter—not a sermon by any means, for John Bertram knew the kind of man he had to deal with, but just a father's friendly letter with casual allusions to the important cases which his son had before him.

"I think you have done wisely in taking a reposeful holiday, loafing in your uncle's garden of Armida, rather than tearing about Central Europe, as you did last year. You will come to your work as fit as a fiddle, and I think you may go up a good many rungs in the ladder before the end of Term. The Cattermole case, if it doesn't fizzle out in a compromise, is big enough to make a man's reputation, especially a man who has got into your position already. You ought to be in chambers by the tenth at latest, for I know Colneys want a conference before the case comes on."

And so on and so on—gentle reminders that life wasn't all beer and skittles, or the *dolce far niente* of a millionaire uncle's luxurious country house.

Was there any thought of Mary Smith in the governor's mind when he wrote that letter, George wondered? He must have heard enough about her from Mrs. Bertram and

the aunts. Was there some such thought when "the Garden of Armida" ran off his pen?

Yes, it was the Garden of Armida, a place of enchantment; and George had to get himself out of it in less than six days.

There was only one way. He had told himself that very often of late, in happy day-dreams. He had to win Mary Smith before he left that garden, to be sure of her, and to go away serene and at ease in the blissful certainty that Mary Smith would soon be Mary Bertram. No fear of her jilting him. He knew that honour dwelt under that broad brow. Mary's word once given would be immutable. And he told himself that she loved him. Even behind her sweet seriousness, as far from the coming-on young woman as light from dark, he had seen, or he believed that he had seen, signs and tokens of love. He told himself that she loved him, and that he had but to ask the crucial question, and go back to London with the measure of her third finger in his waistcoat pocket. What should her engagement ring be? Diamonds of the purest water—old Indian diamonds. He would hunt London for the whitest, just a half hoop of diamonds such as he had seen in the Crown jewels at the Tower.

And of that arrogant hour when he had vowed that he would win her—at his own price—at the price of a shameful surrender. At the price of a cottage on the Upper Thames, with a garden and a motor-house, at the price of infinite tenderness and lavish generosity. That was to be the price he would pay for slightly damaged beauty, for a woman with a flaw in her history, who might be his cherished mistress, bound to him till death even, but never his wife.

That arrogant vow was forgotten. Pacing their favourite pathway one delicious night when the harvest moon was flooding the wood with her divine light, after passing the greater part of the day in Mary's company, he stamped his foot upon the ground in a sudden rage to emphasize a far different vow.

She should be his wife. He would never question her.

He would know nothing of her past. Whatever had happened, calamity had left her pure. If she had been rescued, if she had been through deep waters, she was none the less a pearl of price, that a king might be proud to win. All of respect and appreciation that Austin had given to her was her due. She should be his wife—and never, if they lived to their golden wedding day, never would he lift the veil from anything that was tragic in her early life. He would never ask her to look back.

Confident in her love, he let the closing days glide by until the last—the last that was left to them. He had counted the hours from the beginning of that final week—counted them as a miser counts his gold—thinking how " this hour next week I shall be in Court, or in chambers, or in the big stupid house in Portman Square—and I shall be hearing prosy talk of politics, or of the case." And then he would reckon the time till he could come back, or till his uncle and Mary would be at Warburton House, and he could run in there every afternoon. For his uncle would know by that time—he would know and he would approve. For if he had not meant them to fall in love with each other, if he had not meant Mary to be his wife, he would never have allowed them to be happy together under his eyes. He would have sent George away with some biting reproof.

George was sure that his uncle would smile upon his love. Opposition he would have to face—from his mother worst of all, from the large-minded father very little.

He sat by Mary's side in the flickering October light, finishing one of the innumerable sketches he had made in that wood while Mary watched him, pretending to be absorbed in her needlework. After spoiling his work by a careless wash of cobalt, he dropped the paint-box and board. Then turning to her suddenly, he plucked the work out of her hands and grasped them both in his own.

" Mary, you know, you know how passionately I love you."

She tried to release her hands, tried to stand up, but he held her with almost brutal strength, held her to him with an irresistible arm, that circled the slim form.

" Mary, you know, you know ! "

He could say no more for some moments. He was almost hoarse and speechless, without breath. Then relief came and he poured out his brief tale of love. He adored her, and wanted her to marry him. She only of all the world of women must be his wife, she and none other. He had been living in Paradise. He had never known what joy meant till he came to this dear wood.

Her answer was scarcely audible, the low grave voice he loved was lower than he had ever heard it and faintly tremulous.

" That can never be ! " she said slowly. " No husband will ever call me wife."

" What do you mean ? "

" My fate was fixed years ago. I shall never marry."

" Why not ? "

" I cannot give you my reasons. They are good reasons. Pray never speak of this again, Mr. Bertram. You have taken me by surprise. We have been such good friends through all that happy summer weather, and I thought you might always be my friend, just as your cousin is, though no one could ever be to me what he is—for I can never owe any man as much as I owe him."

" Let him have your friendship, your gratitude if you like. I want neither—I want you. I want you for my wife, the better part of my life, the other half of my soul. I didn't mean to fall in love with you when I came here—I didn't mean ? Why, I was in love with you already—steeped in love, enchanted, possessed. From those delicious days in Venice I was yours, yours only—I belonged to you."

" You were rather rude to me sometimes," she said, with a faint smile.

She was very pale, and she could not speak without that trembling of her lips. They were trembling slightly, even when she was silent—parted a little as if for want of breath, and the hands that he was holding were deadly cold.

" I was fighting my battle. I began to fight from that first day, when I saw you carrying my uncle his tea. I knew my danger in those first moments when I looked at you and saw how different you were from the image I had conjured up when I was told about you. I began to struggle against your charm, sweet enchantress—and I was rude, boorish, an unutterable brute. And how patient you were—how dignified, girdled round with the armour of womanly pride, unconscious of my existence. That was your tone, Mary—you did not know that I was there—your lovely eyes looked past me—looked always beyond me—at the water—at the palaces, at anything rather than the vulgar beast who had not even begun to understand you."

" Please let me go," she said very gently. " It is time I went back to your uncle. It is time for his tea."

" He shall wait till you have given me a better answer. You shall not leave this spot till you have given me your promise. You don't know what passionate love means in the heart of a man. No woman knows. In all those lovers' suicides in low life it is the man who kills himself, not the woman. If he jilts her, she bears it somehow and waits for the next chance. He can't bear it, and kills himself—perhaps after he has killed her. He must have blood. Mary, why do you reject me ? Who is that other man who stands between us ? "

" I can tell you nothing. You have no right to question me."

" Only the right of a breaking heart if you refuse to be my wife. I tell you, Mary, you don't know what love means for a man like me. I won't tell you I never loved woman till I loved you. When I was three-and-twenty, fresh from the 'Varsity, and a fool, as most young men are, unless they are cold-blooded egoists, I was passionately in love—with beauty, just beauty—and the shallow creature I worshipped tore my heart to rags as such creatures do. Cheated, disillusioned, believing myself heart-broken after that worthless love—while the best years of my manhood went by—nothing but vain regrets,

futile longing—and you worked your miracle. Ten wretched, wasted years were wiped out in a week. You see, I do not lie to you and swear you were the first—you are the second—the good angel who rescued me from the bad angel, from her whose breath was a destroying fire. Your love is the flame that purifies—for see, my good angel, I know that you love me. You may reject me, but I shall still believe that I am loved. I could not love you as I do if there were no answering warmth in your heart. Be kind, dear. Put your hand in mine and give me the other half of my soul——"

"It cannot be."

He had released her, and she was moving away from him in wordless misery. She had no answer—nothing to deny—nothing to confess. It was true that she loved him.

He dropped upon the fallen tree where he had been sitting while he sketched, his drawing-board on his knee. Board and paint-box were lying on the grass, where they had fallen before he caught her in his arms and forced her to sit beside him. He rested his elbows on his knees and hid his face in his hands—the strong hands, with the dark veins standing out—and she thought that he was crying. Then something black came leaping across the grass and sprang upon her lover's knees, and nestled against him, licking his hidden face. It was Zamiel who had been hunting rabbits—a badly behaved poodle—and had come back and found the dear man he loved in some great trouble.

George took the dog in his arms and hugged him, before he stood up, pale to the lips, and turned to Mary with one long look of reproach.

"Zamiel has a warmer heart than you have," he said. "Good-bye, cruel girl—good-bye, kind dog. I am going back to the world where men live without love."

He ran along the glade, Zamiel running after him—ran to the little iron gate in the shrubbery, and by the nearest way to the house; but not to the morning-room where Mary was to wait upon his uncle at tea. He went

straight to his own rooms, gave some directions to his man, and began to arrange his papers in the attaché box that just held them.

It was nearly six o'clock, and Mary was sitting in shadow reading to Mr. Field, when George looked in at the door.

"Good-bye, Uncle Conway, I have changed my mind and am going to London to-night. Father says I ought to be in chambers at ten o'clock to-morrow morning. I'll write and thank you for your kindness and my happy holiday when I get home."

There was a break in his voice as he said the last words. The door shut and Mr. Field heard quick footsteps crossing the hall, and then the sound of wheels driving away from the door.

"Something has happened to that young man, Mary. The face at the door was not the face I saw at lunch. Has he been making love to you?"

"He asked me to marry him. I hope you are not angry."

"No, child. I wanted it to be. And you refused him! Why were you so unkind?"

"How could I marry him? How could I marry anyone?"

"You think that other man will come back and claim you?"

"I know he will—because I dread it so much."

"Then you never loved him?"

"I don't know. Yes, I suppose I loved him once—but I don't remember. When I look back it seems as if I were looking into the mind of some silly girl who was a stranger to me. I can see her giddy with the rapture of this new love—the first she had ever known of love, happy to feel a strong arm holding her, and to be told that she was beautiful—she who was accustomed only to be told she was a fool, and who had been made to feel that she was an encumbrance. I suppose that foolish girl loved him. He was so strong—so full of energy—so like a conqueror—like the men she had read of and dreamt of and idealized. Drake, Hawkins, Raleigh—all

those great men of the West that had seemed so vivid and so near, because she trod the soil that they had trodden. Yes, Mr. Field, I was a fool, and I loved him as fools love —without understanding!"

"And if he should come back a free man—the tiresome wife disposed of—and want you to marry him? What would you do?"

"Everything I had power to do to hold myself free from him. But it would be difficult. He told me that he was born to conquer, that no one had ever resisted him—in business—in friendship—in love. The hardest-headed men had been his slaves, the hardest-hearted women had loved him, if he wanted their love."

"If you married my nephew you would be safe."

"Safe! Crushed, humiliated, in the dust at my husband's feet."

"Have you told George your story?"

"I would rather die than tell him."

"Oh, my dear girl, you are more foolish now than that romantic girl of seventeen. Why do you shut the door upon the vista of a happy and honourable life?"

"You would not like your nephew to marry me?"

"It is the thing I would like. I would take you to my heart as my niece—and you should be to me as a daughter —as you are now, by the way—but the world would recognize a stronger link."

Mary burst into tears. She had passed dry-eyed through the flame of George's passion, but this old man's affection moved the depths of her heart.

"How good you are," she gasped, "how generous, how noble-minded! Oh, my dear kind friend, how can I ever honour you enough? What do I want in this life but to be happy with you, and to try to be of some use and comfort to you?"

"You are all the world to me, my dear. Till you came I was very lonely. Books are good to live with— delightful companions—and one's interest in them lasts. But there comes a day when one longs for a living presence —some creature who will be always in sympathy, who will

breathe the breath of life into one's books—share one's opinions or fight against them. I look back and think my books were dead before you came, and that they woke from their dull sleep and came to life when we read them together."

"Let me stay with you, sir. Let me learn more and more of the learning you love—the old unfamiliar philosophers—the learning of all the world. I could never be happier than I have been in your library."

In moments of respect and gratitude, it seemed natural to her to call him "Sir," and even to talk of him to Austin or George as her master.

"Yes, we have been happy together, Mary, but we have to think of the future. Your friend is an old man—a broken man, whose length of days, still short of the scriptural standard, has been accounted a miracle—the triumph of what science can achieve for wealth. Had I been poor I should hardly have survived that wretched fall by a year."

XVII

THE glory of summer faded. Evening came sooner, and the golden shafts that slanted through the forest trees faded before the two footmen had begun to wheel their master's chair back to the house. Mary watched the fading of that wonderful summer with melancholy eyes. Venice or Hampshire, it had been a season of beauty and delight. There had been magic in it—something that could never come again. She had lived with a fuller life than she had ever known before—she had been happy!

And then had come one hour in that exquisite season, when the cup of joy had been offered to her, pressed upon her, held to lips that longed to drink, and she had put it from her, obstinately, implacably, though she had seen angry despair in the face she loved.

Yes, she had loved him. Those days of close companionship when they had thought the same thoughts and lived only for the tranquil delight of being together; hours over which no cloud of difference or satiety had ever darkened; days that were never long enough for friends who seemed to have a world of thought to confide to each other, so much that a lifetime spent together could not exhaust.

It was hardly possible for a woman who had never known the deep thoughtfulness and delicate sensibility of such a man as George Bertram to be cold to the love he had offered her. Over and over again her mind went back to that scene in the wood, and she wondered at her

courage in putting such a lover away from her. How could she see that pale distress in his face, those tears, and make her heart adamant in her inflexible resolve to suffer any loss rather than to run the risk of being put to shame in the eyes of the man she loved?

He had told her that he would take her on trust, that he would ask no questions now, or in the time to come; and still she had refused him—nothing could move her—no promise made in that impassioned hour could stand against the chances of the future. Sooner or later the man who had wrecked her girlhood would come back into her life, and bring shame upon her womanhood. She knew him resolute, unprincipled, reckless, arrogant, and she knew that if he wanted her he would let nothing stand between her and his will. If he ever thought of the woman he had deserted he would think of her as his goods, his chattels, his slave to be called back at the master's bidding. And to find her another man's wife, happy and honoured, would give a zest to his pursuit, would change the caprice of an hour into an indomitable resolve.

There were splashes of red gold on the sunward side of the beeches, when Conway Field gave his orders for the return to London.

"You look as if you were glad to go,' he said to Mary. "Are you one of those people who only like the country in summer?"

"Zamiel and I could be happy here all the year round, if you liked to stay. The poodle would be happier in these woods than in London."

"Yes—he would have rabbits and squirrels to run after—he would have the pleasures of the chase. Sometimes we might hear the hounds in full cry on the other side of the wood—and I should remember days when I was almost as happy as a dog."

Mary never replied upon any melancholy speech of her master's, nor ever made an obvious attempt to change the subject. She just went on with her embroidery and waited till his mood changed and he spoke again.

"It will be good to have all our books about us," he said. "We have a pretty good supply here, but there is always something one misses—some page in some out of the way corner of literature one wants to go back to. And I am something like Anatole France's old librarian with his priceless Lucretius annotated by Voltaire—I have my gems, books that just to handle is enough to brighten a gloomy hour."

"I love to bring you your favourites and to hear you talk of them," Mary said.

How many hours she had spent in that sumptuous library standing beside his chair, while he turned the leaves slowly, stopping to praise, to object, to tear an author to rags, perhaps; for a man who broods long over what he reads can always find something to cavil at, something even to condemn. She had never tired of hearing him talk, and he knew that he did not bore her, so could ramble on with quiet self-satisfaction. She was never weary while the low thoughtful voice went on, a voice out of which the power had gone but not the beauty. She never had to pretend because she was always interested. If she spoke, it was always to the point. If she asked a question it went to the heart of the subject. This was Mary's secondary education. To read the books he chose —to hear him talk. What more could she need?

In her father's literary workshop she had learnt a good deal from the books he had from the London Library, his tools as he called them, when he was mugging up for a tough article in one of the quarterlies. She had copied long extracts for him, and been useful when he was writing against time, but he had never opened his mind to her, never troubled himself to explain or discuss a difficult subject, never appeared to understand that she had an understanding. He had treated her as a child who was just clever enough to be useful, and only towards the last was he beginning to soften towards her, beginning to show faint signs of an awakening affection; so that Mary said to herself with a thrill of gladness, "I think my father is beginning to care for me."

But that was just before the destroyer came, and the new hope was blighted.

Time went on in those two solitary lives—a long time in Warburton House, to the end of the year that had seen them in the Dream City ; and in all that time from the end of August to the beginning of the new year George Bertram had only once crossed his uncle's threshold. Only once, and then he came in obedience to a reproachful letter from Conway Field.

" I take infinite pains to keep would-be visitors at bay," he wrote. " My servants are trained to hold my street door as if it were the gate of a fortress. Pious footmen hardly like to tell the lies that are required of them. It preys upon their minds, Mrs. Tredgold tells me. But I have two nephews whose company never bores me, and I like to see them often and not to have to think that I bore them. Austin comes often and never seems bored ; you come so seldom that I am forced to think——"

The letter broke off abruptly. Conway signed it with his hasty " C. F." and gave it to Mary.

" Read that," he said. " It is your fault if I have an unnatural nephew."

Mary gave him back the letter without a word, but it was difficult not to break down before she had done her work as secretary and written George's address on the envelope.

He would know her hand perhaps, though she had never written to him. He had seen letters she had written at his uncle's dictation ; for she was sometimes writing girl as well as reading girl.

He came on the following day in the wintry afternoon, just as the shadows were gathering in the corners of the library. Where it was so easy to switch on two or three brackets and flood the room with brightness it was only natural to enjoy the quiet time between lights. It was the hour when Conway Field liked to talk discursively, egotistically even, enlarging upon subjects over which he had brooded in the sleepless nights. And Mary was

always sympathetic, loving to humour the whim of the moment.

George came into the room unannounced, and walked straight to his uncle's chair.

Mary was sitting in the shadow of a tall Indian screen, and she thought that he would not see her; but the lights that rose and fell on the low hearth touched her pale grey gown and flickered upon the white forehead under the soft brown hair, and he stopped suddenly in the midst of his apology for needing to be summoned:

"I beg your pardon, Miss Smith, I did not know that you were there."

Nothing could be more coldly formal than his manner. Mary rose hastily, and Zamiel, who had been lying asleep on her gown, jumped up and ran to his old friend with joyous greeting.

"The poodle has not forgotten you," Mr. Field said.

"Zamiel has a heart," George said, stooping to fondle his old friend.

He could just hear the flutter of the light silk skirt as Mary crept out of the room.

"Is it because you are fond of that girl that you keep away from me, George?"

"For no other reason."

"She is a fool. She told me that you asked her to be your wife, like an honest man, and that she refused. She told me her reasons, which to my mind were inadequate But, though she is such a gentle creature, she has plenty of will-power, and I could not move her. I am very fond of that girl; indeed, I believe I love her better than the average father loves his daughters. She has been to me as the favourite daughter, the chosen one—and I should like her to marry you or Austin."

"I suppose it will be Austin. I know he is in love with her, though he doesn't know it himself."

"No, George. Her reasons for not marrying you will hold good with Austin."

"If you will tell me what those reasons are, I shall

understand better," George said, more impatiently than he was wont to speak to his uncle.

" I will tell you nothing about her. If you ever hear her story it must be from her own lips. My troublesome doctor recommends the South for January and February, so Mary and I must take wing after Christmas. Rapallo, Spezia, Viareggio, anywhere along that sheltered coast, and in April to Rome. She has never seen Rome, which is an essential part of her education."

" You think she ought to be educated ? "

" I'm afraid I only think about myself. It has amused me to educate her, just to tell her what books she ought to read. She does the rest herself. She has a natural instinct for all that is best in literature and art."

George stopped a long time after the servants had come in to switch on the lights, to pick up stray volumes and newspapers, attending to details which were generally the care of the reading girl. George stayed till seven o'clock, doing his utmost to amuse Mr. Field, but Mary did not come back. And he went away angry and despairing, just as he had left Madingley.

XVIII

LIFE drifted on with a tranquil monotony, for in England or in Italy life was the same for Conway Field—a succession of days that were always long, always empty of the things that make life worth living. The men who might have interested him, who might have beguiled him into thinking that he still had a share in the world's history, were too busy, too absorbed in the bustle and worry of days that were never long enough for the work that had to be done in them to sit, were it only for half an hour, by the side of a helpless invalid. And it was only now and then that he found a pleasant variation of his monotonous days in the society of some man of leisure whom he had known in London and who had ventured to call upon him, ventured in the face of the general opinion that Field was too much of a bear and a misanthrope to be worth the trouble.

Such a man received a courteous welcome, and, if he had some tact and a good deal of sympathy, his conversation made an agreeable break in the long day, so that Field sometimes begged that the visit might be repeated.

And so the time went on, and Mary, who had known the enchantment of Venice, knew the grandeur of Rome, or knew as much as ruined walls, and pictures, and books written by clever men, could give of the glory of that ineffable past, when the Roman citizen Paul was telling the story of Christ.

Never did a young traveller enter Rome under more auspicious circumstances. Everything had been carefully thought out and arranged in advance for the reception of Conway Field and his reading girl. Pisa had been the

last stage of the leisurely journey, and they came to Rome late in the afternoon, and found the station-master and a bevy of porters waiting for them on the arrival platform where the chair, which with three or four movements of screws and levers could be changed to a sofa, had only to be lifted out of the train and transferred to the ambulance that would take him and Mary to the villa on the hill above the Trinita del Monte, where the whole of the *primo piano* had been prepared for them. Such vast rooms—such noble windows—and such a view! All Rome lay at Mary's feet in the sunset when she went upon the balcony and leant over the massive balustrade and stood there giddy with wonder and delight, drinking in the glory of a scene that has no parallel upon this earth. Not because there are no cities as wonderful as Rome, but because no other scene contains the history of all that is grandest in the life of civilized man—the history of religion, the history of thought.

"Well, Mary, are you disappointed? Will you call Rome a fraud, as I think my nieces did after their first visit? There had not been dances enough to satisfy them, and their friends in the embassies had been neglectful. You are not disappointed?"

"I am lost in wonder. It is all so familiar, and yet so new."

"You have looked at too many pictures and read too many books. They have made Rome stale."

"No, it is all the more wonderful because I have known it so long. I could name every dome and every tower; but to see them there is just as thrilling. I feel as if I had not believed in them, as if I had always supposed that they were only pictures."

"Well, now you know that Rome is not a mirage. It has odours that will assure you of its substance when you drive about the streets to-morrow."

Mary took up her daily task as quietly as if there were no cause for emotion, and this power of absolute tranquillity was one of her charms for the man whose nerves were so easily set on edge. He hated gush, and the other

young persons who had hoped to win his regard had been mostly gushers, who sickened him by their praises of pictures that they pretended to understand and of books they could not read without yawning. Mary was a restful person. She could admire without talking.

He went about with her for a week, showing her all those things that were accessible for his carrying chair.

He had his valet and a Roman of stalwart proportions and inexhaustible guide-book knowledge which Mr. Field usually ordered him to keep to himself.

"We know all your books by heart, *amico mio.* So you need only answer our questions, and keep street-hawkers at bay."

They did Saint Peter's exhaustively, and Mary was allowed to go up to the dome with Garland and the guide, while Mr. Field sat in one of the chapels—that chapel where the kings who never reigned are made immortal in marble. They went to Saint John Lateran, and Saint Peter in Carcere, and they spent two long mornings in the Vatican looking at Greek statues, and busts of Roman Empresses.

"You see by their elaborate hair-dressing that they were not a whit wiser than the women of Mayfair," said Mr. Field, and he was full of light discursive talk while they were moving through the wilderness of sculpture in the great halls, but when they came to the Belvedere he was silent, and lay quiet as death gazing at the Apollo, while Mary gazed as at something whereof all the reproductions she had seen had left her absolutely ignorant. This was verily the spirit of youth and gladness, the perfection of manhood in the dawn of life. Could any mother with a son in his adolescence look at this divine countenance without emotion?

Very few women are highly appreciative of sculpture. They miss the colour that charms and dazzles in the great pictures. They can see the Dying Gladiator without tears, and they prefer the Medici Venus to the Venus of Milo. Mary had never known till she saw the Gladiator and the Apollo what consummate art meant in sculpture.

They came back to the Vatican often, for it was easier

for Mr. Field than any other gallery in Rome, and it amused him to look at all those Roman beauties, and to tell Mary their histories, their caprices, but even here he talked as a kind father would have talked to an intelligent daughter, and when they came upon the most notorious of those Roman ladies he did not expatiate.

"Here is Faustina. The less we say about her the better;" and again: "No doubt you have heard people talk of Messalina as an example of feminine impropriety, not knowing anything about her. Very handsome, is she not? and her hair must have taken two hours to dress in that elaborate style—but she did not make her husband happy. Here is Calphurnia who ought to have been above suspicion but was not."

Conway Field was more cheerful in those first weeks in Rome than Mary had ever known him to be except in briefest intervals. There is something exhilarating in the air of the Seven Hills—so much to think of, so much to talk about. Imperishable memories, glorious ghosts, of which the world can never be weary—the learned, the heroic, the magnificently wicked, they are all there in the same glamour, and who can escape their magic? In those halls of Caracalla, within those majestic walls that Shelley loved, Mr. Field showed Mary the most stupendous relic of Imperial splendour.

"Remember, that most of the sculpture you have looked at in the Vatican, the Lateran, and the Capitol was brought from these halls and that it was here only seen dimly across the steam of a Sybarite's bath," Mr. Field said, looking up at the crumbling walls that had once been so rich in consummate art.

When Rome was exhausted, or so much of Rome as Mr. Field could visit with his protégée, there were new worlds to explore beyond the gates of the city, and the invalid carriage served to convey Mr. Field as far as Frascati without over much fatigue.

The air on those April days seemed buoyant enough to give strength and lightness to limbs that had long been

powerless, to revive a life that was ebbing. For Mary knew that the life that had been so sad was drifting down the river. There had been too many signs of weakness within the last half year to escape the watchful eyes of affection. Mary knew that the rich man's martyrdom was nearing the end, nor was the martyr unconscious of his decay.

It had been his stoic's pride to avoid all discussion of his malady, all talk of symptoms. Only once had he even hinted at his failing powers. It was in the gallery at Warburton House one wintry afternoon when he had been wheeled about by the valet from picture to picture, gazing at each with concentrated attention.

He had stopped longer than usual in front of the Raphael, which he himself considered the priceless pearl in his collection, the one unsurpassable gem. "*Il faut quitter tout cela*," he murmured with a sigh.

"That is what Mazarin said, wandering in the night among his treasures, '*Il faut quitter!*' That astute old Italian, soldier, priest, diplomat, had had a good time, and had fought hard for it," he said to Mary, who was standing by his side. "He had known the worst and the best that life can give, poverty, disgrace, the triumph of his enemies, and he had conquered all and enjoyed all; and now he wandered about in the night conscious that all was over—the long fight, the long victory. The great Judge had given him a long day—but the night was coming. Poor old grey fox—poor old grey wolf."

The old Scotch physician, who was the cleverest, if not the most fashionable doctor in Rome, came every other day, and sat by the patient and talked with him; but until she came to understand Dr. Macpherson and his ways, it seemed to Mary that his visits were of no use, a mere pretence, and an easy way of earning a fee. But one day, when she happened to look up suddenly, and saw the Scotsman's keen grey eyes, after scanning his patient s face, glance from the wasted features at the attenuated hands lying idly upon the soft white rug, that shrewd look with so much of serious thought in it frightened Mary.

And on the following afternoon she took what seemed the desperate step of calling upon Dr. Macpherson.

Mr. Field had sent her to the Barberini Palace to spend an hour among the famous pictures with Garland, and as the doctor lived near the Barberini the thing could easily be done. She knew she could trust Garland.

The doctor's car was at the door, and he saw her as he came out of the house and stopped instantly.

"Were you coming to see me, Miss Smith?" he asked in his brisk way.

"If you are not in a hurry and will give me a few minutes."

"Ten minutes more or less won't hurt my patients. They are mostly old women with nothing the matter with them. Come into the hall. My rooms are at the top of the house and there's no lift."

There was plenty of room in the hall, and a fine old carved cherry-wood bench with a cushion covered with velvet so worn and faded and threadbare that it might have been there when the Barberini Fornarina was selling bread.

"Well, now, is it about yourself or Mr. Field you have come to see me?"

"Only about him. Your expression while you watched him this morning seemed to mean so much. Please tell me the truth about him, however cruel the truth may be."

Her ashen pallor and tremulous lips told him that she was in earnest. Here was no time-server, waiting for a legacy and anxious to know how soon it would come. Here was a woman who loved that poor wreck of humanity.

"You seem to be greatly attached to him?"

"You wouldn't wonder if you knew half his kindness to me. I am only his hired reader and I have not been with him very long, yet he has treated me as if I were his daughter."

She stopped, and Alexander Macpherson, who was made of hard wood, was moved by the emotion in the voice of this affectionate creature. He had often looked at her critically in the course of his many visits, and he had made up his mind that this young woman with the pale

expressive face and dark grey eyes was not made of the same stuff as that variety of melancholy spinsters, companions, secretaries, lady-nurses whom he had met with in his practice, which lay mostly among peevish, elderly women who had come to finish their lives in Florence or Rome. Dr. Macpherson had lived and practised in both cities. No, there was very little of the paid dependent in this girl, and strange as it might seem, she loved the frail invalid to whom she ministered so tenderly.

"Well, my dear, I will tell you just as much of the truth as I know myself, but in this peculiar case my knowledge is only guesswork. Mr. Field's existence is something like a miracle. He told me that the accident which crippled him happened more than thirty years ago, and that he should have lived in his helpless condition through those years is nearly as wonderful as anything in the Acts of the Apostles—and there are a good many strange things in that book. Mr. Field is the last word in medical science; we shall never go farther till we raise the dead. It is so astounding that he has lived so long that I cannot venture to predict how much longer he may go on living. If he had been a poor man he would have died within a month of his fall, and people would have been amazed at his having lived a day—wealth and science have done all the rest. It is difficult for me to form an opinion, as a stranger, but I can tell you that the lamp of life is burning feebly, and that the end may be sudden—and soon."

Mary clasped her hands over her face, and her head drooped almost to her knees as she sat by the doctor's side, motionless, wordless, but with no sound of weeping, no touch of hysteria.

When she uncovered her face and looked at him, Dr. Macpherson saw that every vestige of colour was gone.

"My dear young lady, it is a bad moment for you, but be brave and face it," he said, as he gave her a bottle of strong salts that he kept in his breast pocket for such emergencies.

"We have been so happy together," Mary faltered.

"And you may go on being happy together longer than

seems likely just at present. His weakness may be only a passing phase. I warned you that my opinion must be guesswork."

"I have seen the change in him ever since we came to this place. I have seen the ebbing life. What can I do for him? Tell me what I ought to do."

"Get him back to London, where he will have the doctor who has been attending him for the last ten years, as he told me. He called the man a fool, but a fool who knows his constitution may be better than the wisest of us who are strangers to him. And if he has any near relation whom he likes—a man—I think you would do well to send for him. Let him help you in getting the patient home. This is all I can advise—and you had better say nothing about this little talk behind the patient's back. He might be offended."

"He would be offended," Mary said sadly. "He hates anything like fuss or officiousness. Please never let him know that I have questioned you."

"You may trust me, my dear. So if you can trust your maid, out there ——"

Garland was waiting in the carriage at the door, her neat black toque and honest countenance visible from the hall.

Dr. Macpherson looked at her as he shut the carriage door, and he felt that Garland could be trusted.

An interesting case, he thought, as his car rolled away to the new quarter.

"Very interesting. I hope our millionaire has left this charming creature a substantial annuity. Three hundred a year at least. He has all the air of a great gentleman, who would treat a dependent handsomely."

Mary telegraphed to Austin before she went home, telling him what Dr. Macpherson had said to her, and begging him to come at once, but to treat his arrival as a casual and spontaneous matter.

"He must not know that you were sent for."

She could trust Austin's tact and Austin's affection for his uncle. Nothing but good could come of his presence.

XIX

THEY were re-established in the old rooms, in the old life, regulated as if by machinery, measured by hours and minutes, and every movement in the household adjusted to Mr. Field's ways. Any new servant before he began service in that large household had to be instructed in Mr. Field's ways. It was Mrs. Tredgold's duty to give those instructions, and she delighted in the task. It maintained her importance in the house. She felt like the prime minister of an absolute sovereign, second only in sovereignty to her master. The butler had been inclined to dispute this right with her, had told her that the footmen were his servants, and should look to him for their training.

"Not as regards Mr. Field," Mrs. Tredgold replied solemnly; and then she reminded Mr. Drayson that when she, the widow of a churchman who might have been a bishop had he been spared to enjoy a dignity for which he was especially adapted, had consented to assume a subordinate and in a manner servile position, it had been on the distinct understanding as between herself and Mr. Field that she came to that house to minister to his well-being, and that her authority was to be paramount in all details that concerned his comfort.

The routine went on, in the great silent house, so full of servants, yet so quiet, so seldom stirred by the opening and shutting of doors, or the ringing of bells, or by a barrel-organ or a street-hawker's cry. There were means of stopping all such annoyances for a man as rich as Conway Field.

"Well, Mary, it is pleasant to be in the old room among the old books," he said, with that sigh of lassitude which had been growing more habitual since this year began. "I am tired of most things, but never tired of my books. Time is never too long for them—too short, Mary, all too short. There are books that require a man's life if he wants to get to the heart of them."

"You know what people say about Naples," he said one evening, when he had been dropping asleep in the twilight, only to wake after a minute or two. "See Naples and die—see the panorama of beauty, sea and land, mountain and sky, and expire in an ecstasy. I saw enough of Naples when I was young, drank that cup to the dregs—saw Naples and survived. But I wanted to see Rome once more before I blew out the candle. Rome is inexhaustible, and yet I was tired of it all even before Macpherson began to suggest that it was beginning to be too warm for an invalid. Rome wasn't too warm for me, Mary, but I was tired of it, and I wanted to shift the scene. It amused me to show you the things which once interested me, and to watch your wonder and delight."

He talked more freely to her in these summer days when the evening hours were long and they could sit with all the windows open and hear the thrushes and blackbirds in the garden, where there were elms and horse-chestnuts big enough for song-birds to make their domicile in the smoke-blackened branches.

The London doctor, the man who had been watchdog over Conway Field's health for twenty years, showed no signs of uneasiness—bland, debonair, always cheerful and ready to talk of politics, sport, literature, even science, he came, like Macpherson, every other day. He came and made no sign. Mary had no inclination to question him. He would only tell her in more guarded language what the Scotsman had told her in his blunt way: The life was ebbing.

There had been less pain in this last year and the patient had been more cheerful, more inclined to talk of himself

and of his youth. The flickering of a flame that had once burnt fiercely. But Mary knew that the life was ebbing —just as Austin, who came now very often to sit by his uncle's chair, to talk or be silent as suited Mr. Field's humour, just as Austin knew, though he said no word to Mary. He had been her fellow-traveller in the slow journey home, had done much to make the long days easier. And now he spent much time with his uncle, who had persuaded him to resign his comfortable post under Government, and give himself liberty for the things he loved—travel, good works, books, the better side of life.

"You are too good to go down to your grave as a barnacle," Mr. Field said, "even if you should finish at the top of the Civil Service tree with a ribbon and a star. You are good enough to live your own life and help other people to be happy, which is always easier than to be happy oneself; or it seems so, for oneself is a complex animal, full of far-reaching dreams and desires. Those other people—your East-end friends for instance—seem to want so little, only bread and picture-theatres."

Sometimes, when Austin came early in the afternoon, Mr. Field would send Mary for a walk with Zamiel. The Park was near enough for him to be conveyed there without being run over, the footman always watching him. And on the prairie between Stanhope Gate and the Ranger's lodge Zamiel could give himself a high time, Mary having enough influence to prevent his chasing sheep.

"Go and enjoy yourself in the Park, my dear, while Austin and I talk of the Yard."

The "Yard" was Conway Field's name for that vast manufactory of ships which was the source of his wealth, and in which he had never ceased to interest himself. It was wonderful how, prostrate on this invalid couch, dependent upon artificial means for every movement, he had been able to keep himself in close touch with that complicated machinery always working for him by the northern seaboard. It seemed to Austin as if his uncle knew every man in the Yard, every inch in the measure-

ment of those huge ships whose dimensions were always changing.

Uncle and nephew were often closeted together, talking of things that Mary could not understand, while the busy Frominger took a running note.

"We are not talking secrets," Conway told her one afternoon when she was giving him his tea, "but we discuss details that would only bore you, and Austin gives me his advice about my men. He is a Socialist, in his nice moderate way, and thinks that every man ought to enjoy the produce of the earth and be happy. But he thinks also that the man should buy his good things with good work, and not try to destroy the fabric that feeds and clothes him, because the Capitalist who sets the whole machine going, and who takes all the risks—the one man with a long head and an iron will to achieve—lives in a better house than the rank and file of his hands. If one could only make the labour leaders understand that the master also has a right to the fruits of his toil, and that without capital there would be no contracts to complete, they might cease preaching the gospel of discontent."

Those were peaceful days—peaceful and monotonous, but never wearisome for Mary Smith. Her affection for the man whose burden she had helped him to bear had grown with every day of their companionship. He had given her all that best part of life which she knew how to value; and better even than great books and great thoughts, he had given her the affection which she had never known until she took up her task as reading girl.

He had seldom in all the time they had been together given outward expression to his regard; had never touched the delicate hand with his lips when it hovered about him. He had taken all her attentions as a matter of course, even as something bought and paid for; but she knew somehow that he loved her, and that his affection had grown day by day in those close relations which his helplessness had made inevitable. The sense of being loved was far more to her than all the advantages of her position

in that household, better than comfort and luxury, refined surroundings and the assurance that her future days would not be penniless. To that assurance she had indeed never given a serious thought, though had she ever thought of it her knowledge of Mr. Field's character would have told her that any provision made by him would be liberal. From the hour she entered his house, going there from the doorstep in Sanders Street and the Rescue Home in North London, she had never troubled herself with thoughts of what might be waiting for her in the days to come. There had been so much to think of in Conway Field's library. Each day had brought its round of tasks, and her tasks had been absorbing and sweet. The life had suited her ; and habit had never lessened her interest in the sufferer who had such bitter need of faithful service and of a mind in harmony with his own—something more even than sympathy—understanding, appreciation. Her affection had grown with all the sad hours she had sat beside his bed in his fits of sleeplessness, helping him to wear through the long desert of the night, the pale growth of the slowly coming day.

It was only now that any thought of her future came into her mind, and it was the thought of how dreary and how empty the world would be without those daily talks, that cherished companionship—without the mind that had filled every hour of her life. She knew that the shadows were closing round them, that the last sleepless hours would be changed to the sleep that knows no waking.

She knew, she knew, that the end was near.

XX

THE doctor came every morning now, and every evening too, not with any fuss or elaborate questioning—came in his character of the genial friend, only to ask if the night had been good, to give some slight advice as to the arrangements for the day, and to decide if the weather was or was not good enough for the Park, or a drive to Hampstead or Stanmore. And in the evening the visit seemed still more trivial—just a little friendly talk about the events of the day. Once or twice in those days of gradual decline, the general practitioner asked permission to bring one of his neighbours from Harley Street, one of those new men who had suddenly acquired fame—or fashion—by the successful treatment of a difficult case: a new light in the medical world, who might interest Mr. Field.

"Bring him, if you like," Conway had said, with his most fatigued air, and he would receive the new man with exquisite courtesy, and even appear interested in his conversation, and would allow him to write a prescription for the very last word in soporifics, and pretend to hope that it would give him better nights.

"I have tried every discovery in that line," he said; "but Columbus had tried in a good many directions before he found America, and I may as well try the new opiate."

And then the new doctor went away pleased with his patient and with the cheque that Austin slipped into his hand as they went through the gallery, and wondering at that treasure house of art and literature that he saw for the first time.

"I hope I may be allowed to see your uncle again," he said, "though I fear I can be of very little use. I shall look in some time as a friend, if you think he will like to talk to me."

"I believe he will," Austin answered simply. "He is keenly interested in progress and discovery, most especially in your profession."

He was keenly interested in everything. Never had his mind been more alive than now when those who watched and listened to him knew that the man with the scythe was waiting at the door, that nothing science could discover, or wealth could buy, would prolong that vivid existence—so frail a wreck, the irreducible minimum of physical power, yet so intense a life—the life of the mind.

In those hours that Mary spent alone with him he talked more than he had talked on his best days; as if there were just a touch of restlessness and fever in the too-active brain.

He liked to talk of the books she had read to him, Jowett's translation of the Phaedo, William James's lecture on "Human Immortality." He made her read the lecture to him for the third or fourth time.

"Even William James is elusive when he talks of the soul," he said. "It all comes to the same thing in the end—a question that can never be answered on this side of the river. Socrates or Butler, Plato or Schopenhauer. It all comes to Rabelais' *grand peut-être*. One is glad when men like Romanes and James are on the side of the Angels. But, after all, how can they help us? They cannot know the unknowable. Dreams, speculations, soap-bubbles floating above our heads, golden in the sunlight—a flash and they are gone."

Mary sat by his side and listened to him. It was all she could do. Trained nurses had been suggested, but he had no need of them. His valet was as highly trained for this particular case as the best surgical nurse in London. There was nothing more to be done for him now than there had been ten years ago—a dull monotony of

helplessness that had permitted no change of treatment. The only change was that the thin thread of life so wonderfully spun out for thirty years was worn to the snapping-point.

"Mary, if ever you have wealth and power, be kind," he said to her in one of his snatches of talk, after long silences. "Never mind if the people you help are ungrateful—not even if they are worthless. Don't harden your heart against suffering, in whatever shape it may come to you. Be kind, my dear, it is the only thing one likes to remember when we are on the threshold of the great mystery—the great perhaps. The prince of jesters could get no nearer the truth than that, and Gregory the Great could know no more of the final fate of man than François Rabelais."

All was over. Conway Field had slipped out of life very quietly at the last—like a well-bred man who knows how to leave an assembly without fuss.

He did not expire in an epigram, or mark his departure by some exquisite courtesy.

"I am very tired," he said to Mary Smith, reading Plato to him when the cold grey winter dawn was creeping between the edges of the curtains, and a chillier air through the open windows had come with the coming of the light.

"Shut up your book, my dear. I have had almost enough of Jowett, almost enough of everything, almost enough."

His voice was weak, but no weaker than it had been for a long time. There was nothing to alarm Mary. The doctor who had looked in at nine o'clock last night had given no note of warning, the fatal word "Sinking" had not been uttered. But the progress had so long been downward, the end had so long been inevitable, that day after day his doctor had left him at night wondering whether he would find him alive in the morning.

Mary pressed the electric bell that rang in Ridley's room, and that faithful attendant, who had only left his master at three o'clock, was by the bedside before Mary

had put the book away, with the ribbon across the page ready to be resumed whenever Mr. Field called for it.

She had read longer hours of late than he had allowed her to read until this last winter. She had sat by his side for the greater part of the night, reading, reading, for she knew that the sound of her voice soothed him, and often helped him to blessed intervals of sleep.

She left him knowing that Ridley would not leave him and that no other attendance would be needed till the day began—the late beginning of a day that was always too long, the laborious toilet, valet assisted by two footmen, the meagre breakfast, the change from the spacious bedroom to the splendid library, or, if he were in a restless humour, to the gallery, where he would have himself wheeled to and fro along the walls that held his cherished pictures.

Mary's sleep had been deep of late, the deep oblivion of a tired brain, and this morning there seemed to have been no interval between the moment when she laid her head upon the pillow, and her awaking with the sound of Garland's gentle voice in her ear.

She started up, wide awake in an instant, and saw the winter sunshine in the room, and Garland standing by her bed with the morning tea. She put the tray on the table, but instead of retiring softly after her wont, leaving her mistress to rouse herself at her leisure, ready to answer the first vibration of the electric bell, never obtrusive, rarely speaking unless she was spoken to—this morning she seemed different somehow. She stood motionless, with a grave sad countenance.

"What kind of morning is it, Garland?"

"Oh, ma'am, such a bright morning, and the sun in all the rooms as if it was April or May."

And at this point Garland burst into tears.

"Oh, Garland, what has happened? Is Mr. Field worse?"

Mary sprang out of bed, put on her dressing-gown, and ran towards the door.

"Don't, ma'am, don't go to him. It is all over. Mr. Field passed away last night, an hour after you left—passed away in his sleep. Oh, don't, don't cry, ma'am," entreated Garland, who was sobbing vehemently. "Such a peaceful ending—just one long sigh and he was gone. Ridley said it was beautiful, and his face looks like one of the marble faces that he set such store by."

He had passed away. Conway Field was not. The one friend who had needed her, and had loved her, the one creature to whom she had been first useful, and then indispensable, was gone for ever. In the simple speech of Susan Garland, Conway Field "had passed away." In the still simpler words of Holy Writ, Conway Field "was not."

She could not even go to him—could not stand by his bed and look upon the marble face. Strange hands had taken possession of him. By and by she would be allowed to see him, Ridley told her. Not now. They were getting him ready for the grave.

Mary went back to her room disconsolate—more miserable than she had ever been since she had entered that house, anxious, frightened, hardly daring to hope that her services could be accepted there, expecting to be crushed by a haughty dismissal. And she had been made welcome there, and treated as daughters are treated when a father is kind.

He was gone, and she knew for the first time how much she had loved him: how large a space her affection for him filled in her life.

The days that came after this were dream days—seven of them—seven short wintry days in the darkened house, where only a streak of unwelcome sunshine stole through a crack in a shutter, and made a jarring note in the funereal darkness.

All the splendour of the things he had loved, pictures and statues, seemed to look at Mary and Austin with a cruel irony. They had helped him to bear that long disease—his life—and now he was gone it seemed as if the soul had gone out of them. They, too, were dead.

'It is the finest private collection in London, perhaps in Europe," Austin told Mary, "for it is the knowledge of the man who buys and not just the money he spends, that makes a collection valuable; and I believe my uncle's all-round knowledge of Art was unequalled. He had nothing else to think about for thirty years of his life, poor soul!"

"I hope he has left his collection to the nation, complete and unbroken," Austin said one day. And that brief speech was the only allusion to Mr. Field's will that had been made in that house upstairs since his death. Downstairs no doubt there had been infinite talk, no doubt the upper-servants had held their conclave over that pudding course which they ate aloof from footmen and other underlings, and each had expatiated upon his or her ideas of what the master ought to have done with his money, and each speaker glowed with pride as he set forth his views, pride in his own splendid sense of justice, based upon his exceptional knowledge of the world and of mankind.

Mr. Drayson, the butler, of only fifteen years' service, had been oppressively voluble, and would hardly brook contradiction. He allotted the bulk of his master's fortune to Austin Sedgwick, who, according to his idea, was one of those unassuming young men who often drop in for a good thing. He had been more with his uncle than any of the batch of blood-suckers, and no doubt his uncle admired him for sticking all those years to his work in a government office—just a clerk with a pen behind his ear, week in, week out—instead of bleeding him. He did not allot much to George Bertram, who had been fool enough to neglect the old man in the last year of his life.

"He had a good chance when he was at Madingley with us, the summer before last," Mr. Drayson said, "but he didn't follow it up."

Of their own expectations these superior servants said very little.

"I don't think we've any call for anxiety," Drayson

said. "He was every inch a gentleman—and he had large ideas. I make no doubt he will have acted handsomely by us all, each according to position and length of service, down to the scullery maids. All I hope is that stuck-up parson's widow won't come out top."

Ridley laughed.

"You wouldn't like to see her keeping her carriage, with a flat in South Street, Drayson."

"I hope I may never see her sour old mug after she leaves this house."

"How about Miss Smith?" asked Ridley, who had been more reserved than Drayson, and had allowed that gentleman to distribute his master's fortune as he pleased.

"Miss Smith is a lady, which old Tredgold never was and never would be. Miss Smith is as clever as she can stick, she's had winning cards, and you may be sure she has known how to play them. She's one of those quiet women who can look a long way ahead. He will have settled something handsome upon her, tied up so tight that she can't waste it upon any blackguard husband. I shouldn't be surprised if he had left her a thousand a year."

"Very handsome and more than enough to meet the case," said Mr. Drayson. "How about the contents of this house? I've been told the collection is worth over a million. Frominger knows something about that, for he's drawn all Mr. Field's cheques for the last twenty years."

"That," Ridley replied with authority, "will be left to the nation, with twenty or thirty thousand for a building—something in the Greek style, to carry the name of Conway Field down to posterity."

"Did Mr. Field tell you as much?"

"Mr. Field wasn't one to tell anybody what he was going to do. But there's such a thing as telepathy, and it isn't likely I should have been with him so long—his companion day and night—without being able to read his thoughts. His collection will go to the nation, and the building will be finer than the Tate Gallery."

Ridley had now taken up the running, and every other question was referred to him.

"Who will have Madingley?"

"For a guess, I should say Mrs. Halling, his youngest sister. Her that lives in a picturesque village in Bucks. I have seen her cottage, as artistic as you please, with a garden that was an eye-opener when I saw it in the summer, when Mr. Field sent me down with his birthday present—a six-cylinder landaulette, about as perfect a thing as you ever saw. She was having tea in her garden, and she showed me and the chauffeur round—and I was able to tell Mr. Field what she had done for the place—just a few odd bits of meadowland cultivated in the most up-to-date style, like one of those gardens in *Country Life*. I gave her brother an exact description of it that evening when I was getting him to bed. 'Elaine was always a garden worshipper,' he said in his musing way, more to himself than to me, and I made up my mind then and there that Mrs. Halling would have Madingley, when his time came."

"That ain't much to go upon," Drayson said dubiously, "but you're always cocksure. I should just as soon say, for a bold guess, that he'd leave Madingley to Miss Smith. He hung upon her so when she was there with him. And he give her the choicest poodle that money could buy. I shouldn't wonder if he left that place to Miss S."

"That's because you haven't ever gone as deep into your master's thoughts as I have, Drayson. No blame to you, for you haven't had the personal compact that I have. Mr. Field was a man with a profound sense of family obligations, as his father and his grandfather had before him. His sister Guinevere always rubbed him the wrong way, and he was barely civil to her when she came to see him. Yet it would hardly surprise me if he had left his eldest sister Warburton House—minus the art treasures—and the bulk of his fortune, only because she has kept the name of Field."

"Any of his nephews could take that name, by letters patent, and send it down to posterity, which that stuck-up

piece of goods couldn't," said Drayson, and before the wine and dessert had been put on the table the late Mr. Field's upper-servants had come to high words about the disposal of his fortune. Butler and valet were both cocksure, and each had that exaggerated value for his own opinion which is one of the characteristics of cocksureness in mortal men.

The dream days went by in those upper floors where there was an oppressive scent of eucharis lilies and a silence as of the grave where Conway Field would soon be lying.

The hall porter never ceased from receiving the flowers for which it would seem the lovely coast of Provence must have been stripped of its beauty to pay honour to that white and wasted figure in the darkened room.

Friends who had not seen Conway Field for thirty years, acquaintances who had only seen him once or twice in his life, strangers who only knew him as the princely subscriber to charities in which they were interested—all sent flowers—wreaths and crosses, hearts and anchors, every costly artifice that fashionable grief has invented.

A great many people came to the house in that season of darkness and muffled footsteps. Ridley and Mrs. Tredgold told each other that Warburton House had never been so much alive as now, when Death reigned with closed doors upon the upper floor. There were people who came on business, and who were closeted with Austin in a room on the ground-floor. Austin had to see everybody. There were men who came from the North, men who dressed and comported themselves as gentlemen, but who were stronger and squarer of figure and more bluff of speech than the West-end Londoner. These came from the "Yard," men of weight, head officials, in the great ship-building business. They stayed long, and were to reappear on that solemn day when the master of the house was to cross its threshold for the last time. They were to be there in that same spacious and severe dining-room that had been a place of splendour and conviviality forty years ago when Conway Field's

father was master of the house. No one had ever dined in that room since his death.

It was there that Conway Field's will was to be read, and the representatives of his shipping interests were to be present at the reading.

Among the figures that were seen oftenest in that half light was the funereal form of Guinevere Field, a tall and commanding figure in the deepest mourning that the famous house of Regent Street could provide at a few hours' notice. From the first day of gloom Guinevere had come there swathed in crape from her neckband to the hem of her skirt.

" He was often wanting to me, but I will not be wanting to him," she told Mrs. Tredgold, who complimented her upon her achievement in mourning clothes. " He might forget that I was his eldest sister, but I can never forget that he was my only brother."

She came every day, and she stayed long, prowling about the darkened rooms as she had never been allowed to prowl while their master was alive, bringing the tip of her aquiline nose much nearer his choicest pictures than Conway Field would have liked to see it.

She took up china vases and turned them about to look for marks with a ruthless scrutiny.

" I suppose all these things will have been left to the nation," she said, with a sigh of resignation. " They will serve to carry my brother's name to future ages ; but this house will look bare without them. The house and its contents seem to belong to each other somehow, my dear Tredgold ; it will be a pity to part them."

Her dear Tredgold assented, and ventured to suggest that both house and contents might be left to the lady to whom she was talking, and who had an ancestral right to them.

Miss Field broke in upon Austin's solitude two or three times a day, but all her attempts to elicit his opinions upon the thrilling question of the millionaire's will were useless. Austin knew nothing, or pretended to know

nothing, with a stubborn and impenetrable affectation of ignorance.

"Don't tell me that you who were with your uncle more than any of us throughout the last ten years can have been left in the dark as to his intentions," Guinevere said, offended and contemptuous.

"My dear aunt, the will is to be read to-morrow afternoon, and everybody in this house will know all about it. You are much too well off to feel any anxiety about the disposal of your brother's fortune; and you ought to know that he was just as well as generous, and not likely to forget any of his obligations."

"I used to think my father a just man," Miss Field said gloomily, "but I knew better when I heard his will read, and found that he had given an inordinate share of his wealth to his son and only a pittance to his daughters."

"A pittance of fifty thousand pounds."

"Fifty thousand pounds is a pittance when a man is disposing of millions," Guinevere said sternly. "What your mother must feel when she looks at her two daughters, neither of them beauties, and one getting on for thirty, is more than I like to think about."

"Then don't think about it, aunt. My mother will rub along pretty well."

"No doubt she will, if your uncle has made you his heir," Miss Field retorted snappishly, and then after a silence, in which Austin went on with a letter he had been writing when she intruded on him, "One question I must and will ask," she broke out in a louder and more rasping voice.

"Pray do. You have asked a good many."

"Is that young person to be at the funeral?"

"What young person?"

"Miss Smith. Your protégée."

"Naturally."

"Then I hope she will not intrude herself in the carriage I have to sit in."

"There will be carriages enough for everybody. You

can have one to yourself if you like, or you can go with my mother or Aunt Elaine."

"Elaine will be alone; I had better go with her. Your mother will have her two girls," said Miss Field, with an idea of crushed crape.

There had been some question as to whether the women of the family were to appear at the funeral. But as there was to be no memorial service in Mayfair, and the ceremony would be in no manner public, Mr. Field's sisters had decided that it was their duty to be present at the grave.

"I suppose Miss Smith will go with Mrs. Tredgold?"

"I think not. I would rather have her with Clementina and me."

Miss Field gasped, a gasp that was distinctly audible, and for some moments the rustle of rich silk as she swept towards the door was the only sound that broke the silence. At the door she stopped, having recovered speech.

"I can only say that this arrangement is on a par with your East-end eccentricities, but if Clementina can put up with Miss Smith it is not for me to object."

George Bertram had only entered the darkened house once since death had been master there. He had come to look upon the calm dead face, and had knelt by the bed, in a silence of some minutes that might or might not have been spent in prayer, and he had laid his tribute of white flowers at the feet of the shrouded figure, and had gone away. Mary Smith in her upper room did not know of his coming.

His image had flashed across her mind now and then in the depth of her grief, but had never brought with it a thrill of love, or a pang of regret for the stern resolve that had parted them.

XXI

BLINDS had been drawn up, and shutters had been opened all over Warburton House, for the short interval of afternoon light between the departure of the funeral train and the closing of the day, and before the reading of the will had been finished the winter night had begun outside and the house was once more splendid in the light of innumerable lamps.

The will had been read, and everybody knew the worst, and the worst was so bad that Mrs. Tredgold had gone home with Miss Field, who had been seized with violent hysteria immediately after the reading, and had need of some faithful attendant even for the short distance between Warburton House and Lansdowne Mansions. She had gone home tightly packed with her good Tredgold in her miniature brougham where so rarely was anyone but herself allowed to sit.

To-night she was fain to put up with Mrs. Tredgold, and to sob and gasp and emit spasmodic screams with her head on that respectable person's shoulder.

"I might have expected it," she screamed, in a sudden outburst, "I ought to have known it when he bought her that poodle. Why wasn't the poodle at the reading of the will?"

"He was with his mistress," Tredgold replied meekly. "She was too broken-hearted to be there herself, poor girl. I never saw anyone so changed as she is, in so short a time—quite broken down."

Even in the midst of her hysterical symptoms Miss Field detected a subtle change in Mrs. Tredgold's tone.

"She couldn't face us, Tredgold," she said severely, "she couldn't stand before us when the infamous result of her plots and plans was to be brought to light. But you must not suppose that the demented old man's will is going to hold water. We shall fight it, every one of us, Tredgold, shoulder to shoulder—we shall fight that abominable will to the foot of the throne."

It was an extraordinary will. Everybody who had known Conway Field, or who knew his melancholy story, said the same thing. His will was extraordinary. But no one except Guinevere said that it was an unjust will; no other member of his family hinted at any intention of going to law about it.

A man so rich as Mr. Field, with no heirs of his body, might be allowed to indulge his whim, and to leave a great part of his fortune to a stranger to his blood.

Nobody who could claim relationship had been forgotten. To each of his nephews he had left a third share of the ship-building yard, which meant exactly what Dr. Johnson said of Mr. Thrale's brewery, the potentiality of wealth beyond the dreams of avarice. He had divided a hundred thousand pounds among his four sisters, and he had left each of his nieces ten thousand. Poor relations whom nobody had ever heard of were provided for. Every man or woman who had served in his house and had behaved properly, down to the outermost odd man or scullery-maid, gardener, or stable-boy, had been remembered. Servants at Madingley, outdoor or indoor, servants in Mayfair had everyone his or her legacy, proportionate to length of service and good conduct.

Mrs. Tredgold might keep a one-horse brougham and inhabit a flat in the Cromwell Road. Mr. Ridley might retire from service, and saunter about the world as a person of independent means, to be met in seaside hotels and wondered about: a person who, although not quite-quite, would impress strangers as steeped to the lips in the knowledge of high life. Mr. Drayson might realize the butler's dream of bliss, and take a house for bachelor lodgers in Jermyn Street. Peter Frominger, the ill-used

of nature, might realize his far sweeter dream of a cottage in a Devonshire valley, with the sea in front of him, and the hills at his back, and a garden, and a village where the villagers would soon be familiar and pleasant with him, and where perhaps the vicar would come in of an evening to play chess until midnight sounded from his church tower.

Everybody had reason to be satisfied with the rich man's distribution of his riches, and ought to have been content to wonder, without ill-will to Mary Smith, the residuary legatee.

Mary Smith no longer, since she was described in the will as " Mary Tremayne, known as Mary Smith, my dear friend and companion of three patient years, in which she has borne with me in all my gloom and ill-temper, always gentle, always sympathetic, and always wise. I leave her rich without fear that she will develop any change of character under the influence of riches, and with every hope that wealth in her hands may be a source of good to the largest number. And upon all matters of business I recommend her to consult my nephews, Austin Sedgwick and George Bertram, whom I know as men of honour, and of kindly feeling, who will make her interests their own and in every way carry out my wishes."

Miss Field had listened to these words in a stony silence, to be followed soon after by that stormy outburst which had required Mrs. Tredgold's attendance. The hysterical attack had indeed begun in that admirable person's sitting-room, where Guinevere had retired agitated and tremulous when the solicitor had read the last word, and folded up the will.

Mary Smith—otherwise Tremayne—showed much less agitation when Austin told her the particulars of the will; and yet it would have seemed enough to flutter the nerves of any young woman who had never known more of wealth than a salary of three hundred a year.

Warburton House was hers, and all its contents, the matchless collection which she might bequeath to the

nation, if she liked, only at her own will and pleasure. Madingley with all its acres was hers, and all that would remain of Conway Field's fortune when debts, legacies and annuities had been paid. And this residue, which included a third share of the ship-building business, Austin told her, would amount to from forty-five to fifty thousand a year.

"My uncle's benefactions were large and widely spread," he told Mary, "but he had always a surplus to invest at the end of the quarter, and he had the financier's flair, and seldom made a bad investment, though he was something of a gambler and ran risks."

Mary listened unmoved until Austin spoke of his uncle's charities.

"I knew he was kind, but he never talked of the hospitals or the private cases he helped. I only heard of them once in a way by accident. Mr. Frominger wrote all his business letters, and I think he must be the only person who knows."

She broke down and burst into tears and had to struggle against her growing agitation. And now for the first time since his uncle's death Austin was able to realize the depth of this paid dependent's grief for the friend who was lying on that wind-swept hill where his father and grandfather had been sleeping in the century that was finished and forgotten.

"You loved him," Austin said softly, not with surprise, nor yet as a question—only with assurance of his sympathy.

"How could I help loving him? You must understand, for I think you knew him better than anyone else. You knew all his gifts of heart and mind. You and he were the only friends I have ever had—the only near friends. I wish he had not left me his fortune. He told me once that he would provide for me—that I should never know want. If he had told me that he meant to make me rich, I should have begged him not to do so. What can a lonely woman do with all that wealth, except give it away? And what a care! What a responsibility!"

"Don't grieve over that, Mary. You have a fine brain,

and you will learn to face your responsibilities, and you will make a wise use of your income. And by and by, when Time brings its consolations, you will be glad to have the things that he has given you : the library, where so many hours of your life were spent with him, and Madingley—you will be glad, by and by, to be mistress of Madingley."

"It is very beautiful—too beautiful for one solitary woman."

She bent over her dog, who had never left her in these days of mourning, bent down till her forehead rested upon Zamiel's black head, the faithful Zamiel who knew that his mistress was unhappy.

"You ought to leave this house, Mary. You are looking very ill. You must have change of some kind."

"Why ? "

She did not want to leave the house where she had been happy. There was something that jarred upon her in the idea of avoiding the rooms where he had lived through the long trial of his mature years, where, in spite of his physical limitations, the mind of the man, the powerfu brain that was Conway Field, had grown and developed silently with the days and nights, the months and years. To the last the mind had been growing—new fancies, new ideas, new opinions of the great minds that had gone before him, the great dead men whose thoughts were his companions, had crossed and recrossed the tablet of his brain. His conversation with the girl who always understood or always sympathized was never trivial and never dull. His thoughts were a web of many colours across which wit or humour was always shooting sudden shafts of light. Austin and George had both said of him that he was equal in variety and interest to the best of the men whose profession it was to excel night after night across the dinner-table.

Mary sickened at the thought of leaving a house where his image seemed a living thing, the shadowy companion of her days. But Austin was insistent. Her vitality had sunk to the lowest ebb, she could neither eat nor sleep.

And Mrs. Tredgold, who had developed an extraordinary anxiety about the young person whom she had once tried to snub, came to her sitting-room one morning followed by a strange doctor.

"I ventured to send for Dr. O'Reilly, for I felt it would be really sinful to allow you to go on neglecting your own health as you have neglected it since my beloved master's death."

Dr. O'Reilly was an Irishman of good repute in his profession—a nerve specialist who had most of the indoor duchesses in his care. He could do nothing for the outdoor aristocracy, the riding, golf-playing, swimming and rowing members of the peerage. He shook his head with a slow, sad smile when these were spoken of, and opined that they would break down some day, and snuff out like a candle; and so they did occasionally, just often enough to maintain the O'Reilly reputation for subtle prognosis, only the other doctors argued that it was not hard riding or too much golf that finished them, but hard drinking and too much food.

Mary allowed her pulse to be felt, and her lungs to be listened to, and when the doctor, having found nothing alarming, recommended change of air and scene, that old, old remedy for wasted frames or broken hearts, she told him that she would go to the north coast of Cornwall, a district she knew and where the air suited her.

"Perhaps it is your native air?"

Mary assented, and the gentleman from Harley Street retired pleased with himself at having found out one small fact about this mysterious young lady who had been the subject of conversation at a good many dinner-parties.

XXII

MARY was roaming solitary and unafraid upon those wide spaces of wind-swept turf where she had roamed as a child with stray dogs for her companions, where she had wandered as a girl with a book under her arm, wandered till she was tired, and glad to nestle in some grassy hollow sheltered and hidden by the furze bushes that turned the cliffs to gold when the spring sunshine called them into bloom.

Again she looked down from those tremendous cliffs, down on to the more tremendous sea, and told herself that in all of this world's beauty that she had looked upon, there had been nothing so wonderful as this wild stretch of cliff, and this wild waste of waters. Venice was lovelier, a more dazzling world for memory to carry away with her, when she saw the city no more. But Venice was not as grand as this magnificent sea! She went down by winding paths she had known as a girl and had so often trodden with fearless footsteps, she went down to the sands in the February sunshine and watched the great waves rolling over the beach, rolling towards her as if they were hurrying to sweep over her in their relentless might. What power, what beauty in those Atlantic breakers! What a dazzle of colour and light, now the deep blue of sapphires, now the vivid green of emeralds, now with splashes of crimson staining the opalescent water, darkly brilliant like hidden jewels, the treasures of some wrecked argosy.

There was nothing changed. The day was just such a day as she remembered in many a year of childhood, a day when the dull greys of winter seemed to have gone from

the world for another year, and earth was happy again and full of splendour and joy. Spring had come, and there was only the short, kind February to be lived through, and then the cliffs would be rosy with the sea pink, and the first primroses would be peeping out on the banks, and the tender green pennywort would be crawling over the low stone walls in the lane, and the first gold of the furze bushes would have begun to light the hills. Alas, what an abyss of time since she had been standing in that familiar spot, looking around with eager eyes—what a bottomless gulf between Mary Smith and Paul Tremayne's little girl wandering alone along the shore, unconscious of evil and of sorrow, ignorant of sin!

Mary Tremayne of Warburton House had the world and all that it could give—could go where she liked, do what she liked. But she could not mend the Past; there would always be the memory of disgrace, of bitter experiences, and of one abiding sorrow. She was not elated by her good fortune. Nothing that Austin had said to her of the potentialities of her position, and the wide outlook before her, could cure the despondency that had come upon her after Conway Field's death; she had been interested in him from the beginning of her service, and as time went by and he came to open his mind and heart, her interest had become an affection that filled her life. Each day brought its pleasant duties. She was never tired of serving him—she was happy in the assurance that she was always helping to lighten the burden of his days. He was gone and her mission in life was over. Like a mother who has lost an only child, or a childless wife who has lost her husband, she felt that her business in the world was done. Nobody wanted her; if she were to die to-morrow, she would not be missed.

Sometimes in her meditations the thought of the man who had offered her love—passionate, reckless love—would come back, and she knew that in that wonderful August, in that exquisite wood, she had been dangerously happy, and that her fortitude had been put to a hard test when she refused George Bertram. But the ordeal being

past, she knew that she had done well. Some day, if she had yielded, the shipwreck would have come—the fatal past would have risen up to destroy her. She knew that she had done well; and even in her loneliness, in the depths of her despondency, she did not repent. She had no thought of luring her rejected lover back to her.

Nor had he made any attempt to communicate with her since his uncle's death. He had sent her no letter of consolation, no assurance of his sympathy, though his position as one of her business advisers and partners might have justified such a letter. He had made no sign.

Austin had told her that he and George would be always ready to help and advise her, and that she could refer to them in every difficulty, wherever a man's help could be of use in a woman's life. But she thought that he included George in this assurance only from the desire not to put himself forward obtrusively, and her reply had told him that it was to him she would look, now and always.

"Money is a great responsibility," she said. "You must teach me to make good use of mine."

"It shall not turn to withered leaves in your hands," he said simply. And she, who knew something of his life, knew what this meant.

That early spring was delicious on the Cornish cliffs, and Mary Tremayne's health and spirits improved day by day in her open-air life, in the old familiar places. She took Garland about with her, more to avoid any appearance of singularity than from any fear of being alone. Garland was happy to walk or to sit on those wild heights in sight of the sea, and if she did not think Cornwall as curious as Venice or as gay as Rome, she was sure that it was less relaxing than either city—indeed, almost as healthy as Margate. She was content to sit and entertain herself with endless crochet while her mistress read. She never spoke unless she was spoken to, and she was a good walker and liked walking—so Mary had every reason to be satisfied with her.

But Garland was not with her mistress when she went over the house by the sea, the house that had been empty for a long time, and of which the garden had been abandoned to the riotous fertility of thistles, docks and groundsel. Mary found a useful little person in the village street, a jack of all trades, who eked out the profits of cabinet-maker and upholsterer by the commission paid him for looking after empty houses, and occasionally letting one. This obliging person, who perceived nothing in the tall, slim lady, whose height and slenderness were accentuated by her black gown and flowing cloak, that recalled the growing girl whose lithe figure had flitted along the street with three or four vagabond curs at her heels, treated her with the respect due to a well-to-do stranger who had chosen to come to the Old Ship Inn with her maid, at a time of year when very little money from the outside world was brought into Port Jacob.

Visitors in the summer were plenty, visitors who painted, and visitors who just loafed and pretended to do things, or who went out with the natives and spent long healthful days in deep-sea fishing, or put their lives in danger by attempting to sail craft of which they knew nothing. A month's notice was necessary if you wanted good rooms at the "Ship" between July and October, when every fisherman's wife, however small her cottage, could have a lodger if she could accommodate one.

"If people knew what beautiful weather we often get in March and April, Londoners would come here sooner," the agent told Mary, as he escorted her across the pebbly beach to the house where she was born.

"It has been empty for nearly three years," he said, "which is a pity, for it's a spacious house, and a convenient house, quite the gentleman's residence; but it's in an awful state, and the old pincher who owns it won't spend a matter of twenty or thirty pounds to make it habitable. They're all alike. They grumble if you can't let their houses, and they'd sooner see their property rot than spend a bit of money on it."

They were standing in the porch where Jack Rayner

had taken shelter on that day of wind and rain. The agent unlocked the half-glass door, and Mary followed him into the room where the greater part of her life had been spent; the long slow years of childhood, and those swifter years when the child was changing into the woman. She had learnt to read at her father's knees in front of yonder hearth—such a dark and fireless chasm now, like an empty tomb that some explorer had opened—so bright and warm when the child stood by the student's large leather chair and tried to follow his pointing pencil over the page where almost all the words were strange.

She had been quicker to learn than the average child, but, looking back, it seemed that the process had been intolerably slow, and recalling her father's irritable temper of later years, she wondered at a patience that must have been almost sublime. That he, the scholar of Balliol, should have taken upon himself such a task!

She did not see the black emptiness of the open fireplace, or the blotches of damp upon the panelled wall. She was looking back, looking at the room as it had been on the afternoon when rain and wind had wrought the fatal change in her life. Till that day, when for the first time within her memory a stranger's foot had crossed their threshold, all had been peace. Her life had been for the most part joyless, but it had not been unhappy. All that was tragic had begun in that eventful hour when the wind tore at the casements, and the rain lashed the glass, and Jack Rayner had come into the room, tall, strong, a king of men, shaking the rain off his loose coat, like a retriever dog that had just sprung out of a stream. She remembered the deep, strong tone of the voice that had thanked her father for his courtesy; the bright laugh that finished the apology for his intrusion—something cordial and conciliatory about the man that even Paul Tremayne, who hated strangers, found irresistible. From that day he had seemed a familiar friend, and his company had been accepted. Her father, who had kept himself obstinately aloof from his neighbours, receiving attentions meant for civility with undisguised distaste and

shrinking especially from any intrusion from the summer visitors at the "Ship," had welcomed this man, and enjoyed his vivid talk of a life that had been adventurous and full of colour.

The little agent, alert and inquisitive, had watched the strange lady in black while she stood with her back to the empty hearth, and looked across the room to the latticed windows with dreaming eyes. Such deep thought was not the usual attitude of strangers to whom he showed the house—disgust, rather, and immediate departure, or else a volley of futile questions, and an eagerness to tramp through all the rooms and explore the offices and garden.

"Might you be thinking that the house would suit you, madam?" he asked at length. "It is large and commodious, and for any tenant of means who liked to take it on a repairing lease, seven, fourteen or twenty-one years, it might be a cheap and dignified residence. The house has great capabilities and there is a garden that would repay care. While perhaps you are aware that we have a climate which so far as flowers and flowering shrubs go might be called sub-tropical. Then the meadows——"

"No," Mary said, "I have no intention of taking the house. I only wanted to see it."

"A pity, madam, that such a house should stand empty," and again he repeated his pet phrase. "The house has great capabilities, large reception rooms and many bedrooms, wide passages, plenty of light and air. As a convalescent home, or a cottage hospital it would be perfect. But, unhappily, we have very few wealthy people in the parish; and as to the visitors—well," with a shrug, "what do visitors ever do for a place except raise the price of provisions and demoralize servant girls?"

Mary went through the rooms—all the rooms and the long corridor on the first floor—her father's bedroom and dressing-room, her own nursery and bedroom, and even the servants' rooms upon the top floor, where the gabled roof gave a picturesque flavour to the irregular spaces and varying levels—two or three unexpected steps here

and there, and massive banisters and heavy doors that marked the liberal use of timber when there were fewer people in the world, and a more conscientious race of builders. "It is a nice old house," Mary said, "and it is just possible that I might find you a tenant."

Upon this the little man became effusive, but Mary did not encourage his volubility.

"I will ask you to come to me at the hotel," she said, "before I leave Port Jacob, if I should have any use for the house. In the meantime, perhaps you can tell me some thing about people I knew in this place some years ago. The vicar, Mr. Holditch, and his wife, are they still here?"

"The Reverend Holditch is still among us, madam, but somewhat failing, suffers sometimes from loss of memory, and is more dependent on his curate than he used to be. Mrs. Holditch passed away two years ago after a long illness. She was twenty years younger than the vicar, and nobody expected her to go first. You knew them, madam?"

"Yes, I knew them. They were kind to me."

The agent looked at her curiously, open-eyed and wondering.

She called upon the vicar that afternoon. She had not come to Port Jacob to hide herself from the people who had known her. However badly they had thought of her, whatever scandal her disappearance might have caused, that was something she had to bear, part of her atonement for sin. She had often thought of the place, and had yearned to look upon the old familiar scenes, though she knew that there would be pain, the gnawing pain of remorse for wrong done to the dead, the bitter memory of the shame that had overshadowed all that was fresh and lovely in the morning of her life, the innocent years that ought not to have known shame. She looked back now upon those years of quiet service and serious thought which seemed to have changed her whole nature, and wondered how it had been possible for her to be caught so easily—magnetized, spell-bound by a fierce and sudden lover, as if the strong hand that gripped her arm when

she walked beside John Rayner over the dying heather was only the physical expression of the strong brain that had dominated her from their first chance meeting on the cliff, the morning after his long conversation with her father in the firelit room, where he had burst in upon them like a creature from another world—the wide world of perils and adventures, of lives risked and fortunes made and unmade.

Had she ever loved him—this first lover? She thought not. He had taken her life into his hands and had made himself her master. But of all that is sweet and joyous in a first love Mary Tremayne had known nothing. Shame had been her portion from the moment of her surrender. Each day had shown her the deepening darkness of the gulf into which she had fallen.

She remembered the love that had been offered her in the Madingley woods, and of the ineffable sweetness of the long days when love had been hiding under the mask of friendship, and passion had called itself sympathy. She measured the lover she had rejected against the lover who had blighted her life, and she hated herself for having taken tinsel for gold.

The servant who opened the door at the vicarage was a familiar figure in Mary's girlhood—the same kindly face, a little broader and redder for the lapse of years, for the smart parlour-maid Mary remembered had now a middle-aged housekeeperish appearance, and the neatly parted hair upon the honest forehead was grey. She stared at the visitor with wide-open eyes. "Miss Tremayne," she gasped at last, and the troubled surprise in her look and tone was indicative of the scandal there had been.

Yes, Mr. Holditch was at home, and no doubt he would see Miss Tremayne, but she would find him sadly changed, sadly changed since he lost his wife.

Phœbe led the way to a parlour opening into the garden, known as the study, where the vicar had his small collection of sermons and popular theology, and where he spent Saturday in preparing the Sunday dis-

courses, which had grown longer and more hopelessly dull as his mental condition weakened.

"Miss Tremayne, if you please, sir," said Phœbe, in a loud voice and with appalling distinctness. "You remember Miss Tremayne who used to come here often to see my mistress."

The vicar rose suddenly with a flurried look, and stared at Mary rather helplessly, as he motioned her to a chair.

"Of course I remember. Miss Tremayne, yes—there were Tremaynes at the Manor House when I came here—years and years ago. Tremayne, yes—a Cornish name—a good old Cornish name—though I am not a Cornishman I can respect the old names."

Mary took his hand and held it gently, while she looked in his face.

"I think you must remember me, dear Mr. Holditch. Your wife was very kind to me. I was a little girl when you knew me first, a lonely little girl, and Mrs. Holditch was almost my only friend. I used to come to the vicarage to tea very often. I think you must remember, and I used to sit in the vicarage pew."

"Yes, a little girl—of course I remember you. I used to look down and see you there while I was preaching, like the picture in our drawing-room, 'My First Sermon.' We never had any children—Millicent would have liked a little girl. Her life was lonely in this big rambling old house. And you are Mary Tremayne! Come then, my dear, sit here by me, and tell me all about yourself. You ran away with a man whom nobody knew, and your father would not let anybody question him about you. It was all very dark, and my poor wife took it to heart, and ill-natured people said cruel things about you. The people in this parish are very ill-natured. I have been trying to please them ever since I came here, but they don't care twopence for me, and the collections are so wretched that I am ashamed to write them for the verger to put on the door. They make me blush for my species."

"Tell me about your wife, dear Mr. Holditch. I was very fond of her, very grateful for all her kindness."

" She was kind to everyone. It was her nature, and she never wanted gratitude, luckily, for she wouldn't have got it in this parish. She was fond of children, and she was particularly fond of you—because, as she used to say, you were a little lady, and because you had to lead a strange lonely life. She missed you after you went away. And after your poor father's death, some horrid vulgar people came to his house—retired shopkeepers, a herd of boys and girls, who laughed in church if any little thing went wrong, and who played tennis on the green by the chapel—noisy, ill-bred wretches—and no associates for Millicent."

And then, in rather a rambling way, he told her about his wife's last year, a gradual fading away, a weak heart, and then a sudden close of the sad, joyless life.

Since then he had lived, just lived, longing for the call that was to summon him to the land of peace where his wife was waiting for him.

" The land of the leal, Mary, that's where we are all going—drifting, just drifting through a life that has very little real joy for any of us."

Phoebe reappeared to tell her master that tea was ready in the drawing-room, and would he bring Miss Tremayne there with him ?

" Yes, of course I will," he answered, and then to Mary : " Phoebe looks after me ; Phoebe is a kind, nice girl. She has been with us fourteen years, and she knows our ways."

He still used the plural pronouns, and sometimes forgot that he was alone.

Mary looked with sad eyes at the well-remembered room. Nothing had been changed, and there was no look of neglect, or sluttishness, only things were older and a little shabbier—the carpet and curtains a little paler, the chintz covers a little more faded. There were the bits of old English china that Mrs. Holditch had been proud of, relics all of them. There was the engraving of Millais' picture over the mantelpiece, the little girl listening gravely to her first sermon, and the Landseer, the " Shepherd's Prayer," that Mary had especially loved. The

picture was in the gallery at Warburton House. There were the muslin cushion-covers embroidered by industrious hands, and all the little useless things the mistress of the house had cherished, for old sake's sake. Everything had the atmosphere of the Past-Days that were finished and people who were dead.

Mary's heart ached as she looked at the familiar room, remembering how she had been welcomed and made much of by that kind friend, who must needs have thought badly of her when she was gone.

" I did not see much of your father after you had gone," Mr. Holditch said. " You see, there was never much we could talk about without unpleasantness, for he had told me point-blank that all that I held sacred was meaningless for him. Meaningless—that was his word, Mary, and oh, my dear, where should I be if the Master I serve were only a shadow, and the world where I am to find Millicent were only a dream ? Meaningless ! I did not cross his threshold after my wife's death. People told me his temper was soured by your leaving him in such a strange way. But no one said that he took it much to heart. We all knew that he was a hard man."

There was a silence while the old vicar sipped his second cup of tea, looking furtively at Mary now and then. At last, he said gently : " I have often wondered about you, why you went away, and what manner of man your husband may have been—but you have come back, and I am not going to embarrass you with over-much questioning."

" That will be kind of you—for there are questions I could not answer without pain—yet there is something I must tell you about myself. I had the good fortune to be of use to a rich man, cruelly afflicted, a man who had been a helpless invalid for a great many years when I entered his service. He was never a hard master, and he was the kindest and most interesting friend that any woman ever had. I had a liberal salary, more than I wanted for my own use, and he told me that I should be provided for, and never know want when he was gone. That was much to know, for I had known the lowest

depths of poverty. I never thought of his wealth, or expected more than he had promised me. But when he died, I found that he had left me a great part of his fortune."

"You are a very lucky young woman."

"Yes, I suppose everybody would say that, but I was more overwhelmed than elated. I had lost my kindest friend, the one friend who really loved me, and to whom I had been necessary. I was able to make that afflicted life just a little happier, and he flung his riches into my lap; but his death left me a lonely woman. For me a great fortune can be only a great responsibility. I came here because I wanted to see the people I had known when I was a child, and who had been kind to me, for my own sake, when I was a lonely girl, the old servants who took care of me, and some of the fishermen's wives that I knew, and I hope somehow I may be able to make their old age a little easier."

And then she told him how, in wandering about the old garden and orchard and the house where her father had lived and died, it had occurred to her that she might build almshouses for the fishermen's widows, and a home for their fatherless children, on the ground that was well situated for such a purpose, sheltered by the cliff and facing the sun.

The old man was delighted. And when she told him further that anything he wanted done for his church or his vicarage should be done at her cost without stint, he told her that God had put these blessed thoughts into her mind, and that she had made him happier than he had ever felt since his wife left him. He walked to the inn beside her, and seemed a younger and a brisker man by a decade than when she found him in his library; and he prattled about the improvements that might be made in his church —nothing tremendous, restoration of roof or screen—only a stove that would keep his scanty congregation warm in winter, and some necessary repair of the organ which might cost fifty pounds or so, and an altar carpet, the present one being threadbare—and perhaps new surplices

for the choir. As for the vicarage, he would ask for nothing. It would last his time, and he wanted no improvement that Millicent could not see.

Mary went about next day looking for the familiar faces. There was a gap of years to be bridged over, and it seemed a much wider gap than she had expected. Some of the women she had been fond of were old women when she was a child, and it was not strange that these should be gone. But others whom she had known robust and in the prime of life were lying in the churchyard, and girls she remembered fresh and innocent had married badly, or had gone to the bad on their own account, and this was a grief.

Of all the dogs she had loved she found only one, in the cottage of one of her best friends, a fisherman who had been always a model of steadiness and industry, and whose wife was a worthy helpmeet. Here Mary found an old retriever that had been a puppy when she was a little girl—a joyous black puppy, a ball of curly hair that rolled on the grass at her feet, full of fun and mischief, a creature for whom mere existence seemed rapture, and who used to go for long rambles among the gorse bushes on the cliff with her.

"To think you should remember Dinah after all these years, miss," said Susan Nicolls, moved with wonder that anything in her humble home should be remembered, "and you living in London where there is so much to see and so much going on. Yes, this is poor old Dinah!" She pointed to something black and woolly, lying across the hearth, that might have easily been mistaken for an old rug.

Mary stooped down to pat the dog, and Dinah awoke at the light touch, and looked at her with eyes that did not see much of this world's beauty.

"She's getting blinder every day," Mrs. Nicolls said, "and Ben is thinking of doing away with her."

"What!" cried Mary. "Killing her?" She thought with a sudden pang of her own beloved Zamiel, left behind

with the Sloane Square dog-doctor for a course of treatment against canker.

" Yes, miss, the poor old thing aren't much good even to herself, and baby tumbles over her, so that it's hardly safe to leave her lying about—and the children tease her, so she hasn't got a happy time."

" Never mind," Mary said, " she shall be my pensioner, and she shall live as long as she likes."

" She's thirteen years old, miss."

Mary sat in the sunny cottage window for a long time talking with Mrs. Nicolls. She had so many questions to ask, and was so anxious to know about the people she had known, whether Mrs. Holditch's particular protégées or her own friends, the latter not always having been spotless characters.

Alas ! she had been away only six years and so many she had known were lying in the churchyard, or in their wild and wandering grave under the waves that looked so joyous on this sunny morning.

Some had given way to drink and had fallen upon evil days ; but these were not many, for the Cornish are a sober race. But the sea that Mary loved had made many widows and orphans, and she heard of several whom she had known comfortably off in their queer old stone cottages who were now in the Union.

" I am going to build a house for them. They are not going to stop in the Union," Mary said. And then she told Mrs. Nicolls her plan, and that worthy person rejoiced exceedingly, and offered a list of widows who would have filled any average set of almshouses. Mary told her she would find room for them all, and she spent the same bright noontide hours of the following day in a long conference with the little agent, who was anxious to sell her the house, and his cousin, a clever young man, who had been soundly educated as an architect, and had quite a considerable reputation in Launceston, where he had done a good deal of honest work in originating villa residences in the environs of the town for retired shopkeepers and small gentry.

He was a modest young man, who loved his profession as ardently as if he had been Leonardo da Vinci, and he had a young wife and a year-old baby, and would rather have talked of the baby than of himself, but his cousin was loud in his praise.

"He has got the ideas, you see, ma'am," he said, and then he tapped his own forehead. "They are all there. He is brimming over with original ideas. You've only to look at some of the houses he has built upon awkward bits of ground with the added drawback of shortness of funds."

Mr. Brownlow sighed.

"That's the rub, madam. That's where every architect has to move in fetters. We are always pulled up by the question of cost. The best feature in the whole scheme may be your roof, picturesque and commanding, and with plenty of room in it—not a tricky bit of sham without meaning in it, that can be run up cheap—but a solid seventeenth-century bit of work with deep gables, and clustered chimneys. But you're pulled up short because the client can't afford it. So you have to flatten your gables and shorten your chimney stack—and you are ashamed of the result. And if, while you are watching the work and putting your brains into it, such as they are, you see the way to a great improvement that will better the whole design, you are pulled up short again. That would be an extra—and a heavy extra. But there's no margin for extras. It isn't the architect's mind, madam, that settles the shape of a house—it's the client's pocket."

"You shall not be pulled up short in this work, Mr. Brownlow," Mary said gaily. "My almshouses are to be lovely to look at, and comfortable to live in, and I want you to give your best thoughts and a great deal of your time to the work. Be as original as ever you like; only remembering that the health and comfort of the women who are to live in them must be your first consideration at every point."

And then she showed him roughly her plan of the ground. The old house was to stand unchanged. And, leaving

that as a central figure, there should be fifteen cottages on each side of it, so planned as to seem part of an original design, and to make with the central building three sides of a quadrangle. There was to be a fountain and a large stone basin in the middle of the open space.

"The old house will be for my orphans," Mary said, "and the thirty cottages will be for my widows, and in one of the wings you will have to contrive a quaint little house for a chaplain, unless we put him and his wife and children in the Orphanage."

Mr. Brownlow favoured the latter idea. He did not want to interfere with the balance of his two sides of cottages. Then he talked of some Tudor work in the Convent of the Good Shepherd at Hammersmith—one of the latest achievements of an architect whom he had greatly admired.

"I'm afraid we mustn't attempt anything Tudor here," Mr. Brownlow said rather sadly. "We have to keep to the spirit of the old house, which is a late Jacobean—but even that will allow us to be picturesque. I shall be happy to go to work upon three or four sketches—just a tentative plan of what could be done with our ground—if you will be kind enough to tell me roughly about how much you are prepared to spend upon the buildings."

"You have no occasion to consider money, Mr. Brownlow. I am doing this as a labour of love. I am building my houses for some dear old people I knew when I was a child, and I shall not count the cost."

Henry Brownlow turned pale with emotion. He had never had such a client—had never hoped to have such a client—had never dreamed of one. He felt he had come to a turning point in his life. And then his heart seemed to stop beating.

"Is she mad?" he asked himself. "She must be mad. Nobody but a lunatic ever talked like that. It is a regular case of mania."

And then he looked at his cousin, whom he despised on æsthetic grounds, but rather respected as a business-like person.

"Where may I send my sketches, madam? Or may I wait on you with them?"

"I should prefer that, if you please. Mr. Stubbs is coming to me this evening to arrange about the purchase of the property, for I am not yet in actual possession; and if you could show me any rough sketches by that time, I should be very glad."

"She hasn't even bought the place—no money!" thought Henry. "It's as clear as daylight. Mad as a March hare." Yet on looking earnestly at his client he could see no sign of lunacy in the clear, calm face, nor in the simple black costume, so exquisitely neat in every detail.

If she were indeed a mad woman she wore no straws in her hair. Nothing eccentric in form or colour hinted at a mind distraught.

"I'll make my sketch, anyhow," he thought. "I'm on fire to do it. I'll waste a sheet of Bristol board on her, if she's as mad as forty hatters."

He walked home with the Jack-of-all-trades, who was putting him up for a day or two, and who was elated at the thought of having secured him a big job.

"Do you know anything about her?" Henry asked him. "She talked very big. But a solitary young woman staying at that homely old inn doesn't sound like a millionaire."

"She's as rich as she can stick, my boy. My wife got hold of her maid the other day when she came to my place with a note. It was tea-time, and my wife coaxed her into the parlour, and made much of her. She has been left an immense fortune, and one of the show houses in the West End and a place in Hampshire. She's simply rolling, Henry, and you are a lucky dog for having got hold of her. You'll make twenty times the money out of her that I shall with just my paltry commission. She is to pay three thousand of the best for the house and land, and made no more fuss about it than if she was buying a pair of gloves."

"But have you seen the colour of her money?"

" I have seen her cheque on the Union Bank of London, which I sent on to the solicitors who are preparing the conveyance. I suppose she's not very business-like, as she hasn't employed anybody to look into the title ; but I know it's a good one, for the estate has been in one family for the last two hundred years."

Not business-like ! No, of course not—and nobody had seen her money yet, thought Brownlow, who could hardly bring himself to believe that this splendid opening for a young architect was not a dream and delusion—the dream of a mad woman, the delusion of youth that thirsted for fame.

A chance in a thousand if it were real !

He thought better of his chance after the evening when he had spent an hour in the old-fashioned parlour at the " Ship," sitting at the table with Mary Tremayne, showing her rough sketches and hastily pencilled plans—the measurement of rooms and stairs—the space allotted to the little garden which each goody was to have in the rear of her cottage, while the quadrangle was to be one beautiful and spacious garden, with classic stone benches for tired limbs, and old-world Dutch flower-beds.

There were only rough sketches for Mary to look at this evening, but the design and the idea pleased her, and she begged Mr. Brownlow to go on with his work and to make his plans ready for the builders.

He told her that in her interest plans and specifications should be communicated to the best builders between Launceston and Port Jacob, and she was surprised to discover how many such people there were in so narrow a range. Mr. Brownlow suggested one of the best firms in Plymouth, but said they would be longer about the work than the Launceston firm whose work he knew and could recommend. She at once decided for Launceston, and that only the two firms in that town which had built a good many houses under Brownlow's supervision should be asked to compete for the job.

" Either of them will give you honest work and honest material," he told her, and the thing was settled.

She was as eager to see the work begun as a child for a new toy. She for the first time realized that it is good to be rich—and that money, like knowledge, is power.

Her lodgings at the inn were of the homeliest, but they were clean, and the old house was restful at this time of year when strangers had not begun to come that way.

It was only after the almshouses had been planned that Mary went to see her old friends in the house that had seemed to them their last home.

"We're pretty comfortable, you know, miss," one of the old women told her. "We haven't much to complain of. The master isn't unkind, and though the matron is just a bit strick, she means well—and the place is clean. The food is enough if it ain't always nice, but I can't forget my own cottage where Bill and I lived together nearly thirty years, and the morning of the storm when they came to tell me that him and six of his mates had gone down, and I should never see him again—not even lying in his coffin, for there was no hope of any more bodies being washed ashore, and his body wasn't among them as was. He was over sixty, but as hale and active as a young man, and he loved the sea that killed him—the cruel sea that wives and mothers hate."

And then she rambled on about the cottage and her bits of sticks, some of them that had belonged to her grandmother, and that strangers had noticed because they were so old—and some had wanted to buy, and she wouldn't part with them—and they all had to be sold before Bill had been gone a year—and there wasn't enough charing work to be got in Port Jacob for her to keep a roof over her head, and here she was to end her days on charity.

There were other old friends of Mary in the "House," and Mary sat beside each of them, so humbled and downcast in their Union clothes, with only small grievances to complain of, yet all with the one regret for the home they had cherished—their own little bits of furniture—the things that had a history and were interwoven with their lives—and the liberty, the sense of being their own mistress, free to come and go.

"It seems as if we were children again, Miss Mary. We go to bed when we're told and we get up when we're told; and there's days when we may go out, and more days when we mustn't. Folks mean to be kind to us, but it feels like prison, and then we do quarrel sorely among ourselves. I don't know whose fault it is, miss, but there's a good many sour tempers among us."

And then, before she went away, Mary told them how she had been left a fortune, and how she was going to build houses for thirty widows whose husbands had been lost at sea, so that each of those she had known, and some whom she had never known, would have her own home again—a cottage with plenty of room in it, comfortably furnished with things that would remind them of the homes they had lost.

"Almshouses," one of the women said, by no means rapturously. "I suppose it will be like the 'House' pretty much."

Mary could not kindle any enthusiasm. The dull monotony of their days seemed to have killed their capability of gladness. They were overcome, but not elated, and they seemed more startled and puzzled by the new idea than hopeful of a new happiness; so Mary left them with a sense of disappointment. She had thought it would be so easy to make these poor old things happy. She went about day after day searching out the women she remembered as the friends of her childhood, and took infinite pains to discover their whereabouts.

Some she found who had succeeded in keeping their "own bit of a place," and who were still earning a livelihood—still holding their own among the toilers for a day's wage—and in these she found much more delight at the idea of her houses, and the income that was to provide for their comfort. Ten shillings a week, and coals, and nice comfortable clothes, and light, and no more work to do.

These received her good tidings with moving demonstrations of joy, for in these the spring of life was not broken,

XXIII

THE spring of the year went by. March, April, the first weeks of May, and the gorse was golden on the hills—golden as Mary had known it in the long days when her life was divided between indoor work for her father, and long rambles by the sea, or over the moor—careless of weather—revelling in the sunshine but not afraid of wind or rain. She faced the wind and the rain now just as recklessly as in her fifteenth year, and it was only Susan Garland's dumb distress that made her hurry back to the "Ship," when the black storm clouds came rolling up over the cliff, and night seemed all around them.

"Oh, ma'am, it's too awful!" Garland said. "It looks like the beginning of an earthquake." There was a distant rumbling of thunder as she spoke. Garland burst into tears.

"Don't be frightened, you poor thing," Mary said gaily. "This is just one of our April storms. It won't last, and the sun will be shining again before we get back to the inn. I can see the rim of a great ball of fire, behind the edge of the cloud."

Garland was dumb, but walked as fast as she could, making the pace for her mistress, which she knew afterwards, when she was not too frightened to think, was an act of insubordination.

"I hope you'll forgive me, ma'am, for hustling you along like that," she apologized, when they were inside the door of the "Ship."

Mary had found out by this time that Garland hated the country. Those vast spaces of moorland with never

so much as a single stone cottage to suggest human habitations "got on her nerves," which serviceable expression she had picked up from Mrs. Tredgold. A great many things got on that lady's nerves, but Garland had not suffered in so genteel a manner till she came to Cornwall. She had not minded Venice—those water-ways and curious gondolas were only queer. She had not minded Rome, though that was also queer; but she had found Hampshire dull, and she found Cornwall deadly—so few towns or even villages worth speaking of, an absence of shops and people. Far-stretching moors, and tremendous cliffs overhung the sea, from which a grey fog sometimes came up without notice, and one found oneself in the dark. Garland had no taste for the life that her mistress loved.

Mary spent long days in a fishing boat that had been fitted up and made comfortable for her—not quite an open boat since there was a little cabin, in which the skipper could make tea for Miss Tremayne and her maid. And Mary loved these coasting expeditions between Port Jacob and Padstow, or northward to Bude Haven.

The builders were at work in their fullest strength, but the work seemed to make slow progress, and Mary, going to look at the buildings every day, could hardly help expressing her disappointment, though Mr. Brownlow, who came once a week, generally on a Saturday afternoon, and spent two or three hours walking about and peering into things, in close consultation with the foreman, told her that he would not like the work to go on any faster.

"They are giving us their best," he told her, "and we mustn't drive them. After all, you want the work to last, like those old almshouses at Bodmin that Queen Elizabeth saw begun and King James saw finished, and that are as solid to-day as when he looked at them."

Mary was in no hurry to go back to Warburton House. She had not left off grieving for the loss of the friend of those three years to whose comfort and solace she had devoted herself with thought and care that had never lessened, and had never seemed too much. She missed

him every day of her life, and that life seemed purposeless now that she had no one to serve—no one dependent on her. She had been obliged to invent a task, something to be begun and carried through to a successful finish—something that for this year of mourning would keep her interested and employed.

She went often to see her old women, and she found even those dull souls in the House were growing brighter. Waking as from a long dreamless sleep, they were becoming keenly interested in the homes that were being built for them. And one bright day in June Mary devised a treat for her old people—an alfresco tea-drinking on the grass plot in front of the old house, that open space which was to be the prettiest garden within twenty miles of Port Jacob.

The roofs were on the houses and the old people could have some notion of the homes that were being prepared for them. Mary and Garland waited upon them at tea, and Garland enjoyed the little festival, which was the first scrap of gaiety that had come her way since she left Warburton House, where, in her own words, there was always something doing. Mary plied the old people with third and fourth cups of tea, and pressed the local baker's saffron cake, inexhaustible supplies of shrimps and watercress, brown bread and butter and white bread and butter; and the old people ate and drank and prattled of the beautiful place that had risen up out of the ground as if life had all at once become a fairy-tale.

"To think that you should be rich enough to build such a place, miss," one of them exclaimed. "Nobody ever took your father for a rich man, though he always kept two servants and lived like a gentleman. But I suppose he left you all your money?"

"No, Mrs. Gregson, my money came from a friend, who was rich enough to provide for his family and leave me a large income—large enough for me to spend what I like upon my Cornish friends."

"Well, it will be a fine place," the woman answered, looking up at the clustered chimneys, the gabled roofs with their grey-green slates from the quarries over yonder

at Delabole, large massive slates that would not blow off in wild weather. Then she added thoughtfully: "But it will cost a heap of money. Wouldn't it have come much cheaper and easier for you, miss, if you'd made your kindness in the form of little pensions—say, a pound a week for each of us, and live where we like?"

This was disappointing, but the women were not all like Mrs. Gregson, who was a born grumbler, a creature who must have grumbled in her cradle, and quarrelled with her mother's milk.

"You will have your pound a week in meal or in malt, Mrs. Gregson, and a house to live in," Mary said, and she left this doleful person to mumble her shrimps and bread and butter, and appeal piteously to Garland for a fifth cup of tea.

"I've no patience with those old women," Garland said, as she and her mistress walked home. "They don't seem to realize what you're doing for them, and for all that will come after them, hundreds of years after they are gone."

"They are tired," Mary said gently. "Life has been hard for them, and they are tired."

The builders went on merrily, singing at their work, and now Mr. Brownlow was busy with the old house that was to be a happy and a healthy home for fatherless children. He thought of his own year-old baby as he walked about the rooms planning and measuring, and rearranging spaces and artful partitions, presses, and shelves of all dimensions, contrivances that would help to make the children's home a model of neatness—a place for everything and everything in its place, as he repeated gaily, while he jotted down measurements.

It was one of those old houses in which there are unexpected corners, and queer little flights of stairs.

Mr. Brownlow made good use of all the corners, and did away with some of the stairs, which struck him as pitfalls for small children to tumble down.

So the work went on till after Midsummer, and Mary

had been content to spend idle days lying in her cushioned nest in the stern of the *Mayflower*, that craft of three tons which had been chosen for her as the best of the fishing fleet. She had her books—those old companions of which she could never tire—the books she had read to Conway Field, in the long slow hours in Venice, between the Quay of Slaves and the Lido.

This buoyant and never-resting ocean was very different from the Adriatic, which to look back upon from the movement and the freshness of the Atlantic seemed like a dream sea, just as Venice seemed a dream city. Each was lovely after its kind, and she hardly knew which she loved most. Health was coming back to her in these monotonous days, in which she had felt the blissfulness of rest, without knowing that she was tired.

Her life with Conway Field had been an exacting life—a time of constant care and anxiety, and, towards the last, a time of distress and apprehension. To see the life ebbing, day by day, and to live in fear of the end had tried her severely, and the reaction after the fall of the curtain had been terrible.

But strength was coming back to her now, and the pulse of life was beating stronger and more evenly. She was never tired of watching the lights and shadows on the cliffs, the changing colour of the sea, the gulls and shags, and the glimpses of village life suddenly seen across some narrow opening in the cliff—an inlet that could hardly be called a bay.

The two sturdy fishermen, joint owners of the boat, were men who remembered her as a child, and who looked a little more weather-beaten, but hardly a day older for the lapse of years. Their honest brown faces and west-country voices were a joy to her, and even Garland, who confessed to being " timid " when the sea was a trifle rough, had implicit faith in these mariners.

She had suffered slightly from the sea in their first excursions, but now pronounced herself a good sailor, and could sit happily hour after hour in her corner of the *Mayflower*, performing wonders in the way of crochet.

Garland adored crochet, and did not care for the picturesque. She seldom looked at sea or shore; she was not interested in King Arthur nor even in the gulls and shags. She was faintly excited when the skipper told her of seals to be seen playing about in caverns under the cliff, but as no seal would condescend to show himself when she had the telescope at her eye, Garland would go back to her crochet. She had been in the middle of a pattern when the skipper gave her his glass, and she felt that she had wasted good time in looking for things that she could see ever so much better at the Zoo.

It was mid-July and the houses were so nearly complete that Mary felt her task was done, and that she could leave Port Jacob before the "Ship" began to be overrun by the usual visitors, the people who came to fish, and the people who came to sketch. The wide grassy spaces over which the gorse flung its mantle of gold had not yet been trodden by the foot of the golfer, but links would come in good time, her host told Mary, and the popularity of Port Jacob would grow with every season.

Austin Sedgwick arrived unexpectedly one afternoon, and Mary received him with unaffected pleasure.

"How kind of you to come? I was going to write to ask you to look at my houses. I hope you will like them, and not think that I have spent money foolishly on my first little enterprise."

"I don't think I shall. You say your first enterprise. Have you others in view?"

"Yes, a good many, but they are no more than dreams at present. You must help me to realize them."

"With all my heart."

He was breathless, and seemed curiously moved, as they stood face to face for the first time since she had left Warburton House.

"Your native air has given you back the freshness of your youth. You look ten years younger since I saw you last—so young and so lovely!"

The words came in a broken voice, and were not meant

for her to hear, but she heard, and wondered that he should seem so moved by their meeting.

It was tea-time when he arrived in a fly from the hotel at Tintagel, and they went to look at the almshouses after tea, in the westering sunshine.

Austin had nothing but praise for Mr. Brownlow's work, and for Mary's idea of making thirty old women comfortable for the remnant of their lives.

Mary sighed.

"I can make them comfortable," she said, "but I can't make them happy." And then she told him her disappointments.

"You must harden your heart against that kind of thing," he told her. "Philanthropists have to do without gratitude. You know the value of your work, and you must know how often your poor slow-witted old souls will bless you for it dumbly when you are far away."

And then he asked her when she was coming back to Warburton House.

"All has been done as you wished," he told her, "the old servants retained—nothing changed—except that my uncle's bedroom and dressing-room and the valet's room have been kept with locked doors, no one being allowed to enter them but the servant who kept them in order. That was what you wished, I think."

"Yes, that is what we all wish, I think. You and Mr. Bertram, as well as I myself."

"When are you coming back?"

"Not for a long time. I want to live in the rooms where I lived during those quiet years—but I could not bear them yet. By and by I shall like to be there, and to touch the books he loved, and to think that he is near me; but I can't go there yet, nor to Madingley. I am going over to Brittany, where I shall spend the rest of the year, just sauntering about from one old town to another, looking at things, and I want you to do me a favour."

"Consider it done—if it is possible."

"I want you to hire a yacht for me—just a nice roomy

sailing yacht, with plenty of room in it for me and my maid, and her crochet," she added with a smile.

"Your maid Garland. I hope she is satisfactory."

"She is everything that she ought to be. She has only one defect. She hates everything rustic, and she loves lamp-posts and pavements and shops and people. But she puts up with the country for my sake, and she solaces herself with crochet."

Austin dined with her, and after dinner she told him her ideas about the weekly allowance to her old women, the coals and the clothes and other indulgences. And she submitted the financial arrangement to him.

"It must be done by an endowment," he told her, "and you will have to sink a considerable sum for that."

This rather scared her.

"But have I enough money?"

"Yes, you have plenty. You are richer than you think."

"I have never thought about it. But I want to do something that will make people happier—people I know, and these are my only friends. There must be a substantial endowment for the maintenance of the Orphanage—a generous allowance for the chaplain, and a liberal recompense for doctor and matron and subordinates. I want it to be a happy home," Mary said.

She harped upon that idea of creating happiness. It seemed to her the only joy that wealth could bring.

The matron had been chosen and engaged—a person of unimpeachable character, and the chaplain Mary had found in the church at Port Jacob, where he had been curate for six years, doing most of the work on a stipend that made marriage impossible, and he had been engaged for all those years to a young lady who had waited for him with unwavering constancy, heedless of better chances.

"I had plenty of enthusiasm from Mr. Stainforth and his fiancée," Mary said, "which ought to make up for the cold water I got from some of my old women."

Austin was going back to London by the first through

train next day. He had only come to see her work, now that it was nearly finished, and to hear her plans.

"My life is fuller than when I was a barnacle," he told her. "I have more work and more responsibilities now I have my share in the Yard. I am beginning to feel the rich man's burden."

"But I hope Mr. Bertram helps you?"

"Not much. He takes his responsibilities very lightly, and he is much keener about his work at the Bar than about the biggest contract our firm ever captured. He doesn't care much for money. He will be in Parliament before long, and I hope he won't feel out of it there."

Austin came from Tintagel early on the following day and met Mr. Brownlow and had another and more deliberate survey of the Almshouses, with that gentleman at his elbow, ready to explain what he had done, and to hear Mr. Sedgwick's suggestions. This interview over, Austin proposed going back to London by an afternoon train. He had seen the Almshouses, and he had put Mary in the right way as to all business details, and it seemed to him that there was nothing else for him to do, except drive to Camelford Road Station in good time for the train. His kit-bag and dressing-case were in the dogcart in which he had driven from the hotel at Tintagel. He was a rich man now, but still travelled without a servant. He had liked the company of mountain guides, even put up in out-of-the-way places with a courier who could cheat in four languages, but he had not yet resigned himself to the idea of his own man, always at his elbow, and always officious.

When he talked of going back to London that night, Mary surprised him by asking him to stay.

"The three-thirty is a slow train," she said. "You would not get to London till too late for anything worth thinking of in the East or the West End. Stay and dine with me at six o'clock, and give me an evening for talk. You will have a full moon for your drive back to the "King Arthur," and it is not a difficult road. There is so much

that I have to say to you. I want your counsel and your help. You were my only friend when I was poor, and you are my only friend now I am rich."

Austin flushed as a woman flushes when she is deeply moved, and then paled as a woman pales before he answered her.

"Why, you have troops of friends," he said with a laugh. "My mother and my Aunt Bertram are panting to be of service to you and they will bring a troop with them. Their chief idea of kindness will be to bring nice people about you—the nicest they know, with handles to their names. That is their idea of friendship, especially my mother's, who has never known quite as many nice people as she wants to know, and who annotates her "Debrett" every time she scrapes acquaintance with a peeress, or even a spinster with a courtesy title. But she is a good woman all the same, and I hope you will overlook her little failings, and come to like her in the progress of time."

"I shall like her because she is your mother, even if there were no other reason," Mary said gently.

She could not pretend to be cordial about a lady who had never shown her the slightest civility while she was a salaried reader.

Austin and Mary began their long talk at dinner, just such a short and simple meal as the "Ship" could produce with distinction.

They talked all through dinner chiefly of the Almshouses, of the chaplain and his wife, and the old women who were to live there, and they went on talking when the decanters and the untouched dessert dishes had been removed, and the "Ship's" attempt at black coffee had been served.

"I'm afraid you must think me very childish," Mary said, "but this is my first use of money, the first thing I have done worth doing since I have been alone—with no one to help or advise me, as he would have done. I never knew how charitable he was till after he was gone. Then Frominger told me the stream of bounty that had

flowed from Warburton House, and how those who could prove themselves worthy of being helped had never been denied. And now I want you to teach me the best use I can make of the fortune that fell into my lap almost as a terrible surprise. It was too much—and I am always asking myself what I ought to do with it ; whether I ought not to live very quietly at Madingley, and give all the rest of my income to the people you have told me about in the East End—where the sufferings of a multitude in abject poverty is an evil that cries aloud for cure."

" An evil that never can be cured, Mary, except in the socialists' arid world, where there is to be neither the beautiful life of the rich, nor the comfortable life of the prosperous middle-classes, only uninteresting food and a roof to keep out the rain."

" But your people in the East End ? "

" My people and two or three dozen parish priests people are looked after in a way, and a good deal is done for their souls and bodies. Those are not the helots. But there is a lower depth, a black abyss of misery so vast that an army of priests and mission sisters could only reach one in twenty of the myriads who live without joy and die despairing."

" But can't we help them, Austin ? You and I, who are both so rich."

" No, Mary. If you and I both flung our fortunes into the cauldron, there would only be a bubble on the surface, an infinitesimal bubble, and the daily toll of human lives would not be lessened. Don't try to solve the insolvable problem, Mary. Only do the things that please you—the happy things—like your almshouses, and enjoy your life and the beautiful things my uncle gave you. You are to lead a pleasant life, to let the world see you while you are young enough to enjoy society—not my aunt's nice people with coronets on their carriage doors, but the writers, and painters, and inventors, men and women who are moulding the age they live in."

" Yes, one would always love to know such as those."

" When are you coming to Warburton House ? "

" Not for a long time."

" And you talk of a yacht, and a summer sailing about the coast of Brittany, and stopping at quaint old cities, and looking at dolmens and cromlechs. Rather dull work, I should think."

" No, no, I have always hankered for Brittany."

" You will satisfy your hankering in a month, and after that where are you to spend your autumn and winter ? "

" At quiet little places on the Mediterranean—Porto Fino—Alassio."

" A thousand miles away from everybody who loves you."

" There's nobody to love me now your uncle's gone. I shall have enough to interest me in the yacht, and my sailors, if they could only be some of my Cornish men."

" They might be half of them Cornish men, if you will come to Scotland. Spend your autumn among the islands. I will find you a sailing master who will navigate your yacht, and keep your Scotsmen and Cornishmen in order. Just dawdle among the islands till the cold weather begins, and then come to Dunoon for the winter."

" What sort of a place is Dunoon ? "

" Almost as pretty as anything you would find on the Mediterranean, and you would be near the Yard. Wouldn't you like to see the source of your wealth—the great workshop in which my uncle never lost his interest ? "

" I should love to see it and to see the men who work there."

" That is settled. I will find the yacht for you, and you can choose, say, half a dozen of your old friends, the fishermen, to join the Scottish crew."

Mary accepted this total change of plan without a moment's hesitation. It seemed so pleasant to have someone who would take the trouble to think for her.

She was dashed by this new idea of human misery that lay beyond the pale. But she told herself that there were so many people who could be helped—so many with whom a little money will go such a long way—that she had no need to despair because there was a darker world

that her little candle could never light. Austin had told her that it was better to take the work near one's hand, than to torture one's brain by brooding upon impossible schemes.

There were the poor ladies, the patient ones who never stretched out the beggar's hand, and yet were sometimes worse off than the crossing sweeper with his pocket full of pence to carry home to his garret when the day's work was done: the patient ones who could maintain their self-respect in an attic and go to bed early on winter nights to save coal and candle. She could cheer and comfort a multitude of these with a tithe of her income; and she meant to give away much more than a tithe. She meant to make a great many people happy. That was always in her mind—to make them happy, those for whom comfort, which is often a synonym for happiness, could be so cheaply bought. From the five-shilling attic to the fifteen-shilling bed-sitting-room! From the hundredweight of coals to the ton!

Mary stayed at Port Jacob just long enough to finish her business, and bid her old people good-bye. She forgot nobody in those final arrangements, least of all the old purblind retriever, who had been happy with her, and who was to be taken care of at the "Ship" till the chaplain's house was ready, when the chaplain's wife was to receive the old dog, who had grown a good deal younger under Mary's fostering care, and to care for her to the end of her days. There was to be no more talk of doing away with Dinah.

By the time this was all settled Mary's hired yacht had come. It was all that the most exacting spinster, and the still more exacting spinster's maid, could desire. She was not a liner in little, not a thousand-ton steam yacht like those that gladden the eye of the lounger on the pier at Cannes, when the morning sun is shining on the islands. She was not the yacht of a duke or a millionaire, but was large enough and handsome enough to startle the fishermen in the little harbour at Port Jacob, and Mary was pleased with her and pleased with her Scottish skipper,

who had left vacancies in his crew for some of her Cornish friends, notably the captain of the *Mayflower* and his mate.

It had been a long way to come from the Clyde to Port Jacob, but Captain Macpherson had done the voyage short-handed and without one difficult hour; and he expressed himself agreeably surprised by the North Cornwall coast, not having anticipated finding such picturesque scenery out of Scotland.

"You'll see something better, ma'am, when you've passed the Solway," he told Mary, "but these red cliffs are worth looking at."

So instead of sailing over the sunken portions of Amorica to the coast of Brittany, Mary had sailed gaily with her face to the north.

Cruising about from Dunoon and Rothesay, where she dawdled through the summer, and spent the most part of it on shore, Mary's time of mourning went by very peacefully between land and sea. Her placid thoughtful hours passed where the beauty of the world around her was enough for delight, and where even the books she loved best, heaped up in the basket at her side, seemed hardly to matter. Blue sky, blue water, and picturesque scenery! What could any mortal want more for bliss?

And then there was the Yard, of which Conway Field had talked in those twilight hours when he had let himself go, and had not been afraid to talk of the time in which he had been a free son of the earth, free to come and go, free to do what he liked with his life—not a broken machine which had to be moved gingerly by the hands of hirelings, with much aid from expensive mechanism.

He had told Mary about the Yard, that wonderful growth of a father and son's industry, the father a peasant lad, educated at a village school, the son a First Smith's Prizeman at Cambridge. These two had made the Yard, beginning when steam power on the sea had been in its experimental stage, through the long slow years in which the cargo ship and the passenger ship were gradually changing their nature, their shape, their size,

their weight, and every ounce of material from keel to topmast : the long years in which there was always something new, something to make the world wonder.

To the man who had laboured with adze and plane, and whose hammer and rivets had rung merry music round the hull of many a stout teak clipper, the changes that the Smith's Prizeman loved were not always welcome. Indeed, when in the last year of his long life he saw the paddle-wheels of an American packet-boat churning up the waters of the Clyde, he uttered words that were not only uncomplimentary but profane.

XXIV

IT was a year after the building of the almshouses when Mary Tremayne came back to Warburton House, to take her place there as sole mistress of all that it held of beauty and splendour.

Mrs. Sedgwick and Mrs. Bertram, who had both insisted upon interesting themselves in all her plans, told her that she could not live in that house alone without provoking scandal. Somebody in the way of chaperon she must have, however independent and self-contained she might be by nature.

"If you live alone you will be a mark for slander," Mrs. Bertram told her. "Some people will say you are eccentric or mad, and others will say you are improper, and will invent horrid stories about you."

"And you are not going to keep this splendid house shut up like a prison as poor Conway did," pursued Mrs. Sedgwick. "You will be expected to entertain, to give young people a chance. My girls, for instance, who hardly had a cup of tea in their uncle's house from year's end to year's end, expect to see a wonderful change now you are reigning here. 'Miss Tremayne is as young as I am, and she must enjoy society, after having been cooped up reading dry books to my uncle,' Julia said. 'She will be giving nice parties and waking up the big stupid rooms!' You see the idea of a house that doesn't entertain is impossible to girls in society. People nowadays are expected to do their part in making others happy."

"By giving balls and dinner parties?" said Mary, smiling.

" I have been thinking about making people happy ; but not quite in that way."

" You have been listening to Austin, who thinks there is nothing wanted for anybody at the West End. We are to spend all our money on Poplar and Bethnal Green. Poor dear Austin is a saint, but he might remember that he has sisters of his own who ought to count before the Little Sisters of the Poor."

And then the two matrons came round again to the question of a chaperon. However quietly Mary might resolve to live, whether she did or did not " entertain," she must have a well-bred woman of mature years to keep her in countenance. Mary protested that she could not support life with a hired companion.

" If my friend the vicar's wife at Port Jacob had lived I might have asked her and her husband to share my home," she said, and then she told her new friends about the old vicar and his young wife, and how the young had been taken and the old and feeble left.

" Well, it is a question to be thought out at leisure," she said, anxious to put an end to the debate. " I will consult Mr. Sedgwick the next time I see him. He is my adviser about most things."

" You really mustn't call him Mr. Sedgwick. You must call him Austin."

" I will when he asks me," Mary said simply.

And then Mrs. Bertram struck in with what she considered a brilliant idea.

" There is Elaine—the very person ! She is distinctly *simpatica*—she need never bore you. She must have been very lonely since Walter Halling's death, and though she only lives for her garden, and never comes to London except for a day or two just to see the horticultural shows and buy new rock plants, she must often feel sick of her solitude. If she would entertain the idea she would be just the right person, and it would stop the mouths of malicious gossips if they found one of Conway's sisters at your elbow."

" I am not afraid of malicious people," Mary answered,

with a chilling look. "I have nothing to apologize for; and the society you consider so carefully is of no account to me. Whatever purpose I have in life lies quite apart from your world, Mrs. Bertram. But if I cannot live in this house without a chaperon I need scarcely say that I would rather have one of Mr. Field's sisters than anyone else."

"Naturally," exclaimed Mrs. Sedgwick, "but I doubt if Elaine could be induced to leave her garden for the London season, much less for all the year. However, as you seem to like to live in a retired way you might not want her at Madingley."

"Leave it all to me, Selina," commanded Mrs. Bertram, who had always treated her sister in Eaton Square as a person of very little importance since the great reputation of John Bertram, K.C., brought people to the drawing-rooms in Portman Square who were never to be met with at the Sedgwicks'.

Mrs. Sedgwick and her daughters had worked sedulously at the business of entertaining, but had not been particularly successful in that line. The dinner-parties in Eaton Square had been voted dull, and their evening parties impossible, and while they struggled bravely to give one dance in a season in their own house, neither the profusion of roses on the staircase nor Gunter's last word in ball suppers could make up for the paucity of partners.

It was, of course, all the fault of their own men. Mr. Sedgwick hated society almost as much as he hated spending money—and Austin's friends having been admitted once or twice into the family circle, had mostly exhibited the same peculiarity of being always engaged on the date of Mrs. Sedgwick's parties.

"Leave everything to me," Mrs. Bertram said. "Elaine is coming to me next week, for the show in Vincent Square, and if Miss Tremayne will dine with us in a quiet way they can talk to each other in the evening and find out if they like each other, before I broach the subject to Elaine."

"You can do anything with Elaine," her sister said, with a slightly offended air.

Mrs. Sedgwick went through life with the feeling that she was "put upon" by her family and the world in general, but most of all by her family. Clementina said her mother was a poor creature, which was the natural result of having been trampled on by her husband from the first week of her honeymoon.

"I wasn't there," Clementina said, "but I know mother had a miserable honeymoon and was taken to places she didn't like, and bullied because her luggage cost too much in Italy."

Julia was no longer in the schoolroom. She had had her coming-out ball, which was always alluded to as "ghastly" because it had been in Eaton Square when it ought to have been at the one possible hotel, but even Julia's new blood and untiring energy had not succeeded in saving the Sedgwicks' parties.

"I think it must be owing to the Square," Julia told people. "If father had let us move into one of those bright new houses in Pont Street—a house with an eccentric staircase and a surprising hall, people might think better of us. You have to astonish them if you want them to come to you; now that there is a millionaire keeping house in every other street people expect originality —they must be amused from the moment they come in at the door. The house must be astonishing, the furniture like nothing they have seen anywhere else."

"Mother might be as vulgar as she liked, and might call a duchess 'my dear' if she were only startling. It may be undutiful *de ma part*," Clementina said, "but I would rather people should think her 'good fun' than call her dull."

Mary dined quietly in Portman Square, to meet Conway Field's youngest sister, whom she had seen only once, on the day of the funeral; and after spending a seemingly endless evening in this lady's society she was fain to admit that Elaine was *simpatica*. She had an almost childlike simplicity, and from the persistent snubbing of her three sisters, who treated her as the fool of the family,

she had fallen into an apologetic attitude to the rest of the world. Her simplicity appealed to Mary Tremayne, who told herself that if one must have a *Dame de Compagnie*, Elaine might fill the post as well as anybody else.

Before half-past ten, when Miss Tremayne's carriage was announced, Elaine had recited the story of her married life. It had been a love match, and her father had opposed the marriage almost up to her wedding day. "While the only thing he could say against poor Walter was that he had nothing to settle upon me. As if a rich man ought to want anything settled on his daughter."

Poor Walter had possessed every virtue except the capacity for making his way in the world. He had wanted to be a poet and to write blank-verse tragedies that people would be anxious to act, and he had written many tragedies. Year in year out he had sat in his study, and written. He had written scenes that were so powerful that they lifted him out of his chair and obliged him to march about the room in an ecstasy. He could realize the effect, he could hear the hurricane of applause, could see the pit rising as one man. But neither managers nor actors could be induced to read his plays, or if they did read, they declined to see that there was a fortune in a classic tragedy modelled upon Coleridge and the Elizabethans. One legitimate actor had been more enlightened than all the others, and, being generously subsidized by Elaine, had taken a theatre on purpose to give Walter a chance. But the great play and the great player had failed to attract—though the first night had been a triumph, and one of the critics had compared the author with Milton. And this disappointment had broken Walter Halling's heart, his widow told Mary. The spring of his mind snapped under the sense of failure. He left off writing, and told his wife he would like to live in the country, in the heart of rural England, where he need never have to rub shoulders with Philistines, his idea of Philistines being the people who read nothing but the newspapers—and hated blank verse.

"Poor Walter hadn't much money of his own," pursued

Elaine, " and I hadn't enough to buy a big place like Madingley, but we put all we could muster together, and we bought Thorpe Corner—acres and acres of beautiful meadowland, with a roomy old farm-house, and adorable orchards. So we turned the rough old homestead into a Jacobean Manor House, and then we made our garden—and from that time we lived for our garden. He found plenty of occupation and plenty of interest in our garden. There was always something new. We read piles of florists' catalogues—we went to all the county shows—never to Westminster or Chelsea, for Walter had shaken the dust of London off his feet after the failure of his *Joanna of Naples*. Walter recovered his health, and began to grow stout. We lived out of doors, and saw very few people, except the Rector, who was an old bachelor, and by way of being literary, and who quite liked to hear Walter read a scene from one of his plays, and thought they ought all to have been acted."

After this the simple lady gave Mary some particulars of her husband's gradually falling away in health, how after growing very stout he became very thin, and finally was taken from her.

" He had a sweet nature, and our married life had been like a long honeymoon," Elaine said, " and I don't think I could have survived his loss if it hadn't been for my garden. That has been my only consolation. For the last five years I have lived for my garden."

" You mean you have vegetated," Mrs. Bertram said severely. " It is high time you came out of your garden."

In less than a week after this strictly feminine dinner, everything had been arranged by the two elder sisters. Mrs. Halling had consented to abandon her garden for all the nicest months of the year, and to live with Mary at Warburton House during the London season. The sisters harped upon " the season " as if the house could not be habitable at any other time, although Mary had lived there for long spaces of time that had not been season. Slow months in the depth of winter. Sultry Augusts and Septembers when there was no one in London.

Mary had allowed this arrangement to be made for her with a curious aloofness, as if the thing were being done for someone else, and did not matter.

"She behaves as if she were a princess, and other people just her ladies-in-waiting," Clementina said. "She must have a wonderful brain to stand such a change of fortune without turning a hair. It exasperates me to see mother and Aunt Bertram making a fuss about her, and she taking it all as coolly as if they were her servants. I think Aunt Guinevere is wise in having absolutely nothing to do with her."

Julia seldom agreed with her elder sister about anything, and this time she took a decided attitude.

"Old Guinny was a fool," she said. "She ought to have taken Mary under her wing from the day of the funeral, and run her and Warburton House for all they were worth. Think what a splash she might have made with such a base of operations and such an interesting figure as Mary Tremayne. Think what she might have done in an age when people only want to be entertained. She was a fool, and she was a silly fool," continued Julia indignantly. "She might have twisted Mary round her finger, and been practically mistress of everything as long as there was no husband in the offing. And instead of that the old fool sulks in her flat, and goes about disparaging Mary, whose only crime has been to make poor old uncle happy."

"I think Aunt G. has shown a proper pride. She is a detestable person, but in this case I think she has shown self-respect."

"Envy and malice! She is as rich as she can stick; but the greedy old thing expected to get more."

Julia had placed herself unreservedly on Mary's side in all those family discussions of which Mary herself knew nothing. Indeed, Mary had an air of polite indifference to the opinions and feelings of the family which was rather crushing. When they insisted upon being interested in her, and in trying to help her, as in the affair of a chaperon, she submitted somewhat wearily, and did not even pretend

to be grateful. She liked Mrs. Sedgwick because she was Austin's mother, but for no other reason ; and she liked Julia better than Clementina, for a frank good-nature which atoned for her vulgarity, to say nothing of those animal spirits that sometimes made Julia amusing. She never beat about the bush.

" Tiny expects you to do wonders for us," she said, " and I expect you to do everything except find a husband for Tiny. Hers is a quite hopeless case. She was *passée* before I was presented and that was three years ago ; and she doesn't know it, poor dear. She says a girl is as old as she looks, in which case she would be ninety. A girl ! And she spends half her allowance on beauty doctors—and lets her dress-maker's bill run till they wake her up with an impudent letter."

Only Zamiel—a well dog now—had the run of Warburton House. But Julia came when she liked, which was generally every day, and did not go till Mary said : " Now I want to be alone," having given this impetuous young person to understand that a good deal of solitude was essential to her well-being.

" I have always lived a solitary life," she explained.

" What, even in your girlhood ? " asked Julia, thinking that she was going to find out something about Mary Tremayne's mysterious past. That past was always a mystery to the Sedgwicks—and remained one because Austin had shown himself doggedly determined not to tell them what he knew about it. And he must have known a good deal, or how did he come to be so interested in her, how did he dare to foist her upon his uncle ? That particular verb was still used in Eaton Square when the Sedgwicks talked of Mary.

" And were you lonely even as a girl ? " Julia questioned. " Surely you must have had a good many relations and troops of friends ! "

" I had neither. I was an only child, and my father was a student, and lived a solitary life in a fishing village in Cornwall. If you ever happen to go to Port Jacob for the sake of the scenery——"

" I am longing to see the dear place ! " cried Julia.

" You will understand why my life was solitary."

However friendly Mary might be, and however much she took Julia about with her, in that swift, silent car which offended Miss Field almost as much as the poodle, Julia never got any deeper into that unknown past. Mary would talk of herself, and the things she remembered up to a certain point, but at the slightest indication of prying on her companion's part Miss Tremayne froze and became as a wall of ice ; and Julia, who wanted to " run " the mistress of Warburton House, found that she must be careful. After all, the great thing was not to know what she wanted, but to get what she wanted.

XXV

THERE was nothing in the social line to be done for Miss Tremayne. She was not going to be run by a lady in Eaton Square or a lady in Portman Square. All the best people and some of the worst were dying to know her, and managed somehow to get an innings. One great lady, whose husband had known Tremayne at Oxford, wrote to Mary on the strength of this long dead-and-gone friendship, and followed her letter with a visit which Mary received with that ease of manner which everybody pronounced inimitable. They did not know that the source of that ease of manner was profound indifference. Mary did not care whether people liked her —she did not want to be admired. The spiral ascent by which the newly-rich rise gradually to that lofty pinnacle, the entertainment of royal personages, had no attraction for Miss Tremayne. She loved to meet the distinguished people, the men and women who stood out from the ruck, by the things they had done or the spirit that was in them—wit, genius, music—anything really precious. And of all these new friends who, following each other like sheep, had contrived to make her the fashion, the one new friend whose parties she appreciated was a lady whom everybody loved and admired and who always brought to her table the people who were worth knowing—not the richest—not the noblest by ancient lineage—but the interesting people. At that hospitable board Mary met the people she wanted to know—and her few close friendships were begun there.

Julia wondered much at the rapidity of Miss Tremayne's

conquest of society. She was accepted at once at her face value. If she had a past no one wanted to sift it to the dregs. The people who cannot enjoy conversation that is not highly spiced invented stories about her and satisfied themselves in that way.

Mary had to give parties in spite of herself: dinner-parties that were really distinguished, for about these she herself took trouble, evening parties that blazed with jewels, and were as noisy as the parrot house at the Zoo. There was no possibility of selection in these parties. Mary asked all the people who had called upon her, and whom Julia passed as "correct." Julia was allowed to fill in the cards. If there was to be music, Mary took care that it should be of the best, and that it should be heard by everybody who wanted to hear it. She had made the large dining-room into a music-room, with double doors, and this ground-floor room was a long way from the picture-gallery, where the people who came to talk to each other could chatter to their hearts' content. The supper-tables were in the great square hall, where the placid marble faces looked coldly down through groves of azaleas and camellias upon the fair women and brave men eating quails and peaches, and drinking an amount of champagne that was only known to the servants who filled the glasses, and not to the guests who emptied them.

Society highly approved of Mary's parties, and wondered how in her quiet life with Conway Field, reading dull books, she could have acquired the art of "entertaining." The explanation was easy. Mary's parties were a success because she let other people work for her and never interfered with their work. Everything was done as if by specialists. Drayson, whose talents for the management of a fine house had lain dormant during Mr. Field's life, came to his own in the new régime, and gave himself to the task with the vigour of a strong man who had been fretting himself in unemployment. It was he who planned the supper-room and ordered the supper, and no one but Gunter was admitted to his confidence. It was he who ordered the extra liveries to be worn by

hirelings, whereby the Warburton House footmen seemed legion ; and it was he who contracted with the florist who decorated hall and staircase and rooms and balconies, so that from the flinging open of the double doors till they were closed again, society lived in a world of flowers.

Mr. Drayson, with supreme power—the foremen of the great firms calling him " Sir "—felt that he was rewarded for having stood up for Miss Smith.

" Of course I always suspected that Smith was a *nong de gair*," he told Mrs. Tredgold. " There was never anything middle-class about the young mistress. She looked as thoroughbred as the poodle."

Mary stood at the top of the staircase with Mrs. Halling by her side, like her lady-in-waiting, to receive the herd, some of whom she had never seen before : the people to whom she gave the same placid smile, invited or not, the people who were " brought " and who were sometimes more attractive than those who brought them.

" I knew I might bring Mr. Rayner," one of the splendid dowagers said on the night of Mary's last party, " for of course you have heard of him."

Yes, Mary had heard of him, and had foreseen that they must meet sooner or later in the maelstrom—and now they had met, and in her own house, and she received him as calmly as if her eyes had never looked on him till that moment.

She had known that they must meet. She had heard of him early in the season when people were beginning to rave about him. He had only to appear in West-end London to become famous ; but it was in the city that his celebrity began. He had the successful speculator's " flair." The things he touched turned to gold. He came from South America with the reputation of being one of the richest men in that Continent. He came from the Argentine, but he had been fortunate in almost every city and every state, and now after having been in London less than a year his name had become a synonym for fortune, and people were pouring their money into enter-

prises of which they hardly knew the object, dazzled by a name and a history.

His personal influence was tremendous. He steadfastly refrained from giving information or advice about any of those companies of which he was the originator. "I am too deeply interested in the Transcontinental to advise my friends to stake their cash," he would say, in his easy jovial manner. "The most brilliant scheme has its dark side. There is always a zero—everybody knows that. Big profits were never made without big risks."

The louder he sounded the note of warning, the more anxious people were to become shareholders. Most of the men and women he talked to, and especially the women, were gamblers at heart, and grew keener at the hint of danger.

When he sent one of his glittering balloons up into blue space, the crowd rushed eagerly to throw their gold into the basket. And so far—after six months or so of daring adventure all his balloons were sailing in the highest empyrean, and people were never tired of talking about the "Rastac." He had imposed himself upon a certain section of society, and that particular set had imposed him upon the world at large. Everybody wanted to know Jack Rayner. His friends and even distant acquaintances talked of him as "Jack." They liked his name. It seemed as if no other name would have suited him as well. The frank outspoken manner, the clear direct outlook of the well-opened steel-grey eyes suited the name. As he stood up and faced the world, tall, broad-shouldered, strong and straight as a stone pillar, he was the typical John Bull—Bull in his youth before he began to be bulky. Rastac some people had called him! No, there was nothing of the foreigner, still less of the South American about him, nothing tropical, feverish, or fitful. Strong and calm, British to the marrow of his bones; who could be afraid of trusting such a man? His personality counted for more than any of his boards of directors, studded with imposing names.

He passed on to the picture-gallery with the lady who had brought him and was lost in the crowd, but not before George Bertram had seen him standing face to face with Mary, and heard him tell her how long he had desired to be introduced to her. Nothing could be more conventional and commonplace ; but if the speech was just like anybody else's the man was different, and George followed him into the crowd, with a dogged purpose. How easily Mary had received this stranger, but why had her colour faded as Drayson announced these late arrivals, Lady Cheveril, Mr. Rayner.

Only the man who watched her face with the eyes of a rejected lover—angry eyes in which love still lingered—would have noted so slight a change of countenance. But the change was there—a paler look, a slight contraction of the muscles—the indication of an effort to be calm.

George had arrived only a few minutes before. He had been to more than one of Mary's parties, and they had talked a little, and she had been kind, but there had been no chance of even a minute's intimate conversation in the midst of that moving crowd—nor had George seemed to desire any closer contact. His mother had urged him to show himself in Warburton House. It was a duty he owed to that sweet creature who had behaved so nicely in such exceptional circumstances, and who ought to be encouraged and protected by every member of the family.

" You insult her if you keep aloof," Mrs. Bertram told her son. So George had gone to two parties out of five—parties which he would have thought inane and boring to the last degree, if it had not been for the one thrilling moment in which he touched Mary Tremayne's hand, and heard a few words in the soft grave voice—the voice that had been an irresistible charm in the days when he was hardening his heart against her. More than two years since he had seen her face—and the time had seemed long—very long—though it had been time closely occupied, over-occupied, a good deal of it, for since the invincible

J. B. was now among the judges who had to keep stuff gowns and even silk gowns in their places, John Bertram's son, now a K.C. himself, was wanted in every big case.

The son's rise had been more rapid than anybody could have expected. But there is no stronger incentive to strenuous work than an unhappy love-affair, and to be disappointed in love is often the prelude to becoming successful in ambition.

George had drunk the strong wine of success, but he was no happier now than he had been when the old wounds were still aching, and life had seemed worthless because Miriam Stanhope had been false.

This second love of his was of another type, but the barrier she had set up with such a stern resolve had proved impassable. She would not trust the future.

In those long slow days of Conway Field's gradual decline he had seen her often, but never alone. She had taken infinite pains to avoid their being left together, even for minutes, while she was in attendance upon his uncle. He had written to her after she sent him his uncle's unfinished letter. But her answer had given no room for hope.

"You have paid me the greatest honour, I suppose, that any man can offer to any woman," she wrote, "and I ought to be grateful. I know that when we first met you distrusted and even despised me. You thought that I was a woman with a history. You were right. I have what people call a Past, and I know that sooner or later that Past will rise up against me. I am prepared to meet it—to live it down or to bear the world's contempt. But I could not bear the contempt of a husband I loved: and strong in that conviction I refused to marry you. You will never hear my story from my lips, and if you hear it from anyone else I shall not be there to be cast off or forgiven. One would be as bad as the other. Be my friend if you like, as Austin is—on the understanding that you can never be anything more."

He tried to hate her after he had read this letter, written

a month before his uncle's death, and he had been trying to hate her ever since. His mind alternated between cold fits of anger and hot fits of unconquerable love.

And now to-night, seeing her in her new setting with the smart world at her feet, he told himself that he had also seen the man whose existence stood between them. This stranger with the proud bearing and off-hand manner was her Past—this was the enemy who barred his path.

He walked about the gallery, stopped often by people he knew, but passing on after a few words, being always on the lookout for the tall strong figure of the stranger. To him a stranger, but not to the party-going world, for whenever George Bertram caught sight of the man he was in a group of people—women mostly. The women clustered about him—would hardly let him go. And all had the same air of eager interest, the same questioning look in their lips and eyes.

At last, after he had been watching one of these groups for a few minutes, he ran against a man he knew—a junior who had been with him in some of his cases.

"Can you tell me anything about the man over there in front of the Albert Dürer? He ought to have done something remarkable by the way those women hang about him."

"The women are all mad about him. That is Rayner, the celebrated Jack Rayner, who is supposed to have South America in his pocket, who can put you on the board of any company you like between Patagonia and Mexico. You must have heard of Jack Rayner, Argentine Jack, who lives in rooms in the Albany, and gives the finest parties in London at the new night club which he is supposed to be running. Rayner is the rage. The women rave about him, and every hardened Bridge-player believes he can give her a tip on the S. E. that will make her fortune. He only appeared in London last winter, and now he is the fashion. Duchesses ask him to dinner; you see, there's something pleasant about the

man. He has no side, and doesn't flaunt his millions in your face, but just goes about quietly enjoying himself. All the women get in return for their hospitality is a dance or a concert at his club."

One of the women who had been conspicuous in the group came across the room to talk to George Bertram.

"It is very good of you to notice me," he told her, when they had shaken hands, "while there is metal more attractive."

"Was," she answered, laughing. "Mr. Rayner has taken Lady Agnes Stoke down to supper; we shan't see any more of him to-night."

"Davenport was telling me about him. I never heard of this Rayner, and I awake to find him famous."

"That comes of hating your fellow-creatures, and pretending to be too busy to go to their parties," said Lady Cheveril, who belonged to the fat, fair and forty regiment of agreeable women. "Rayner is a delightful person who goes everywhere. We all adore him. He may not be quite-quite, you know, but he is so fresh, so original, so unspoilt by his wealth, and so good-natured in putting one on to a good thing now and then. We couldn't do without Jack Rayner. Is your mother here to-night?"

"My mother, and my two aunts and my cousins. There are too many of us. Good-night, Lady Cheveril," and George made his escape. He had heard a good deal —if not all he wanted to hear. And he left the house, dumbly raging against fate and a woman's obduracy.

He would have married her in spite of the past, and Jack Rayner. If she would only have told him, That is the man—he would have risked the chances of the future. He would have loved her, and held her, and faced the world with her. Why, indeed, should he fear a man who was not her husband and who could not therefore take her from him by the arm of the law?

"Not quite-quite." No, not quite a gentleman—strongest condemnation when a man is poor—a millstone round his neck. Society shrugs its shoulders; the man

is condemned, and must go out into the wilderness, with Hagar and her son, and all the other outlaws. But the same society that will have none of the briefless barrister or the struggling author who lacks its hall-mark can generally find excellent reasons for welcoming the super-millionaire. He is original, he is generous, and will give to all one's pet charities. Who can remember when he is so obliging, that he has just the same flaws in speech and accent, manner and clothes, that made the paupers impossible? In his case the hall-mark is not looked for.

Society had accepted Jack Rayner. After all, there was very little wrong, just a shade too loud a manner, a touch of arrogance that sometimes offended. He never misplaced an aspirate, or outraged the laws of grammar, but his voice was too loud for the dinner-table, and he talked too much—chiefly about himself and the things he had done. So, though he interested most people, he offended others, who told the women who were running him that they would not have that rastac fellow at their houses.

"He is not a *rastaquouère*," Lady Cheveril exclaimed, when this was said to her. "He is one of the Irish Rayners, and was born at Castle Rayner on the Shannon. He has lived in South America, but he has not a drop of foreign blood in his veins."

"You are very kind in answering for him, Lady Cheveril, but if he is not a *rasta* he is a bounder, which is worse. I don't know the place you mention on the Shannon and I don't want to know your Mr. Rayner."

This was hard upon Jack, who had never talked of Castle Rayner, and who often suffered from the too much zeal of his women friends.

He had helped them to make money, and they were always hoping that he would help them to make more, on the strength of which conviction they could not do enough for him at other people's expense.

XXVI

MARY was at Madingley, and Elaine Halling had gone back to her garden.

"I have missed the best of my roses," she wrote to her managing sister, who had contrived this brilliant season in London for her. "Of course, Warburton House is splendid, and all our parties were a success, and Mary's presents were only too generous. Indeed, she is an angel in her rather reserved way, and yet I am very glad to be in my own house, my very own, the house Walter loved. I could spend hours looking at his books on the shelves—his favourite poets—his Elizabethans that he loved to talk about and to quote—you know what his memory was. But, though I never told him so, I did not always appreciate the Elizabethans; they were such gloomy people when they were tragic, and they were so quite too shocking when they tried to be funny. I sit in his study of an evening. It is very dull after Warburton House, but one likes one's own house best.

"I hope your girls will like being at Madingley. I know Mary will try to make it nice for them."

Mary was trying to make Madingley nice for Clementina and Julia. To enjoy the things she liked herself—her books—her solitary walks with Zamiel and two or three other dogs, she must keep those young ladies amused. It was easy enough in brilliant August weather while tennis raged on all the lawns within reach of a car.

People who had never entered those double doors at Madingley in Conway Field's lifetime flocked to call upon

Miss Tremayne, and Miss Tremayne generally happening to be out when they called, had found themselves graciously received and at once put on a footing of intimacy, by Mrs. Sedgwick's girls, who explained themselves as the late Mr. Field's favourite nieces. Clementina and Julia were therefore soon well provided with friends whose luncheons and garden-parties nearly filled the week—friends who played tennis in the morning, and croquet in the afternoon, and generally had a tournament of some kind on hand, if it were only clock golf: friends who would even initiate an excursion to Southampton to see the latest "pictures"—friends who had all manner of devices for filling life with restless movement, and for killing thought. Thus assisted, Mary was free to live her own life, and visit her favourite cottagers and be happy with her books and her dogs; if it were possible to be happy anywhere with the ever-present knowledge that Jack Rayner might at any moment come between her and peace. As he had blighted the years of girlhood, he would blight the years of womanhood, if he could, if she would let him. She told herself that she would not let him—that she was strong enough to fight for her own hand. Austin would help her, Austin, the friend to whom she owed all she had ever known of happiness. Austin would be her defender, if she asked him. But she told herself that she would ask help of no one—she would stand alone and defy this man, who had always been her enemy even when he had loved her.

Early in the London season she had heard of Jack Rayner, the millionaire from South America, and she had been not much shaken by the sound of his name when it came upon her suddenly at a luncheon party. She had always known that he would come into her life again, and it was not wonderful to hear that, after all these years, he had realized his dream of success. He had succeeded and failed over and over again, perhaps, since he left her in the Chelsea lodging-house. Nothing she heard of him surprised her. Several people had asked her to meet him, and she had refused—and two of her

new friends had asked if they might bring him to Warburton House—and she had flatly refused. Then Lady Cheveril had brought him, *quand même*.

She had survived the shock—though she had seen a curious look in George Bertram's eyes, half-questioning, half-reproachful, as he wished her good-night in the flower-scented hall, and she thought that some vague suspicion had come into his mind as he watched her meeting with Rayner. He had not been far off when Lady Cheveril introduced her protégé.

She walked in the woods where she had walked with George in that brief golden time when she had been so perilously near passing from friendship into love. She looked back now, and wondered if she had really loved him. She remembered the sweetness of that time—the sweetness of being worshipped by the man who in the beginning of their acquaintance had shown himself hostile to her. A contemptuous glance, a little cynical speech now and then, which others might not have noticed, had told her in those days at Venice that George Bertram despised her. How could any woman have seen his subjugation without pride, the proud humility of a woman whom the world had used ill?

She had been proud of seeing this hard man at her feet, and she had been happy in those summer days in wood and garden, when they had been close companions without one word of love—and then the storm had burst, and friendship had turned suddenly to tempestuous love.

She had been strong to resist him, but when the conflict was over she had wondered at her strength, and asked herself how she could have hardened her heart against such a lover. She told herself that it was because bitter experience had made her wise, and because she knew that with this man—so attractive—so love-compelling—she might have known a brief summer of happy wedded life, but she would not long have known peace. In that too passionate nature there would have been no security, no

calm, no wise and tranquil thought that would have grasped what her life had been and how she herself stood apart from the shame of it.

If she had told George frankly what Rayner had been to her, and that for a brief season she had loved him, he might have taken the future on trust—but the scorn of a woman who had fallen would have been at the back of his mind—she would not have held him long. No, she had not really loved him, for she had never trusted him. Love would have blinded her to the flaw in his nature, the egoism, the passionate determination to win the desire of his heart in the present, heedless of what might happen afterwards.

A sudden crashing of beech boughs, a loud peal from Zamiel, and a man came springing out of the wood, leaping over that fallen oak upon which George Bertram sat painting on the placid day they parted. Summer then, summer now, and again a nerve-shattering conflict for Mary Tremayne. She had held to her purpose then, and she would hold to it now, and the battle would be easier to win—for there was no traitor in her own heart, no whisper of love, to make her waver.

She stood facing John Rayner as she would have faced her executioner, if she had been standing with her arms bound in front of the guillotine.

"One of your flunkeys told me I might find you here—your favourite walk," he said; and then with a gay laugh: "Fancy Mary with a crowd of men-servants to open her door. By Jove! it is a bit of a change from Mrs. Baker's lodgings, and the slavey, with her sleeves tucked up and a smut on her nose."

"Yes, it is a change," Mary answered quietly.

"And you take it deuced calmly. When I saw you at the head of your staircase with diamond stars in your hair and a rope of pearls round your neck—royal pearls that an Empress might wear—when I saw you, my fairy princess of Port Jacob, a queen in a palace, the only thing that made me wonder was your *sang-froid*."

Mary did not answer. She was no longer looking at

the speaker, she was bending over Zamiel patting his soft curly head, while the other dogs clustered round her knees and did their best to throw her down.

"By Jove!" Rayner exclaimed, "you are a cool hand —a cool hand in Mayfair, a cool hand in this wood."

His voice had grown louder, and Zamiel, whom her caressing hand had quieted, began to bark furiously, while the three other dogs joined in.

"Curse your unruly pack! If it were six o'clock in the morning the men out cubbing would take them for hounds in full cry."

The stable dogs were dumb at the word of command, but Zamiel was the spoilt child and went on barking, though in a lower key. Mary called him to heel and then tried to walk past the unwelcome visitor. He caught her by the arm. She knew the grasp of the strong hand that had held her to his side on the cliff when a sudden gust swept her loosened hair across his face.

"My God, is this the way you treat me? Your lover, the father of your child?"

"*That* is the only link between us," she said, white to the lips.

He had spoken the only words that could agitate her.

He tried to clasp her to his breast, but she freed herself with one resolute movement.

"How strong my lily has grown—a tiger lily. But I was never afraid of tigers. My darling, be reasonable, and be kind. I may have seemed a skunk when I let a whole year go by without sending you any money—but I was down on my luck—without a stiver, and I hoped what I left you would tide over the time till I was in funds again. Come, dear, I left Waterloo by an early train. Give me a bite and sup in your fine country house, and let us talk things over quietly. *Tout comprendre est tout pardonner*, and when you hear what I have gone through —devilish bad luck and rattling good luck—you will understand that your old friend is not a rotter, after all. I am on the crest of the wave now, dear. I have done what I always meant to do, and I want the reward. I

have fought for fortune and for love—I am a free man—and I want my Mary—my wedded wife this time."

"Is your convenient wife dead—the wife who prevented you keeping your promise when we came to London?"

He reddened, and looked more embarrassed than John Rayner often did.

"Oh, I knew—when I came to understand your character—that the wife was a fiction," Mary said with a bitter laugh. "And I know now that you never asked my father to let you marry me. It was not in your plan."

"My dearest, no woman can understand a man. I loved you passionately, I would have fought for you, toiled for you, died for you. But I had to be free, free to fight my big battle—and I have done it, dear, fought and won. Come, what was wanting in your life with me? What cause have you to reproach me—to meet me with angry eyes and scornful lips—the man who comes back to you with heart overflowing with love? What was the something wanting that made you unhappy, which makes you treat me to-day as if I had beaten you? What was there wanting in our lives as between a man and the girl he loved—what, except a service mumbled over in a mouldy old church, or the signing of forms in a registrar's office? To me it would have been humbug in the church, and meaningless in the office. I loved you, Mary, and when I was in luck I showered my gifts upon you. When you were dangerously ill I was the most miserable wretch in London till the danger was past. I loved you and I loved your child—my son, my bonny little boy."

"No," she cried passionately, "you never loved him. You were proud of him perhaps—proud of him as a bit of yourself—proud of him because he was so beautiful and so strong—but you did not love him—you never grieved for his death."

"Yes, I did! Men don't take these things as women do. I was cut to the heart when he died—only the luck

had been going against me for months, and I was playing a losing game just at that time. But years afterwards, when I made my great coup in Brazil—after my first thought of you—came the thought of him. If that poor little beggar were alive now—Eton and the Guards would not have been too good for him."

Mary had been crying silently, with her face hidden, from the first mention of her child. She no longer stood face to face with her enemy, defying him. She walked slowly by his side and let him talk. He was the same Jack Rayner who had taken possession of her when she was seventeen : masterful, insistent, believing in his right to conquer. He took her hand gently, tried once more to draw her to his heart ; and in an instant she was again the indignant woman, resolute, repellent.

" Mary darling, Mary my wife that has been, my wife that must be again. We'll have the marriage service in fine style this time, a choral service in Westminster Abbey, mumbo-jumbo to the *n*th power, and the world and his wife to look on. Is that good enough ? "

" There is no power on this earth that would induce me to marry you," she said. " I am glad that we can talk this business out, here in this wood ; but we must not be too long about it. I have two girls living with me who may come home at any moment. The sooner you understand me the better."

" I am not going to understand, if you refuse to seal the bond. You are my wife, by the right of the past, by our three years of wedded life, by the child you bore me—nothing can cancel that bond."

" Perhaps not. So far as it makes it impossible for me to marry anyone else, I accept my bondage. I refused a man who loved me, and whom I almost loved, refused him here on this very spot. I saw his tears, but I was resolute, and let him go. You see I am not the girl you took away from her father. I have a will of my own, and I know what I am doing."

" You cannot have forgotten the old time—our honeymoon—the happy days at Fontainebleau—that smiling,

lovely place—the forest, the little hotel garden—where we were so happy."

"Happy! While I was tortured by the thought of what had happened to me, the shame of it all. I look back upon it now as a horrible dream."

"My sweet innocent Mary—so young and so confiding. As if it mattered!—marriage lines or no marriage lines. The only question a woman of seven-and-twenty would have asked herself would have been if I had told her the truth about my means, and was able to keep her in comfort for the rest of her life. Come, dearest, be reasonable. You are to all intents and purposes my wife—and you must give me the right to call you so before all the world. Don't be afraid that it is your fortune I am after. I am three times richer than you. People prate about your luck, the Field collection, your fifty thousand a year! Why, my dear girl, I have made fifty thousand in a morning by a prospectus. I have the potentiality of wealth—not so many thousands a year—but the power to make more and more and more money—the power to make other people rich, as well as myself. *That* is what has made the Rastac the most popular man in Mayfair for the last two seasons."

She turned from him with disgust. How vulgar he was—this boastful adventurer! What common clay compared with Austin Sedgwick and George Bertram! How infinitely inferior to her father and to Conway Field, in both of whom mind had been the ruling power!

"I am going back to the house," she said, "my young people may be there waiting for me. Good-bye."

"Is that my dismissal?"

"Yes."

"So be it, my princess. I won't stay to be shown the door by your butler. But I mean you to be my wife. I am not a man who can be easily turned from the purpose that is nearest his heart. I have never left off loving you. After I left you I had to go through a time so dark that I could not keep in touch with you or send you money. I was penniless—a wanderer from place to place, not much

better than a tramp. As soon as the tide turned I wrote you not once but many times—cabled to you—implored you to send me the address where money could reach you. There was no answer, and the only friends I had in London failed to find any trace of you. I did not forget you, Mary. Again and again I advertised in the London papers, imploring you to reply. You did not answer. I suppose your luck had turned too by that time and you did not want me."

And then with lifted hat and a touch of that flamboyant manner which had stamped him as not quite-quite, John Rayner turned from her with a careless "*Hasta la vista*," and was gone.

She heard his rapid footsteps rustling through the bracken, and the wood was lovely and the world seemed at peace, as she went slowly homeward.

XXVII

THERE was an autumn season with promise of exciting debates, and the West End was full of people—interesting people who were in the movement, in the *train de supplément.* People who were only going through, from Continental cures to British shoots—in a word, London was alive, and there seemed to be almost as many parties, of sorts, as if it were June. Invitations were shorter and less ceremonious. There were no spectacular dances at the Albert Hall for the newspapers to write about. No rag-pickers' ball, in aid of the fund for sweated sempstresses in the East End. But there were Cinderella dances for girls and boys—to which the boys did not always come; and there were the theatres now so multitudinous that every night was a first night somewhere, and if the St. James's had not a new comedy, the Criterion had a new farce—always something for which it was worth while to dine early.

London was alive again, and Mary Tremayne was at Warburton House, with Elaine Halling as chaperon and Clementina and Julia as rather noisy visitors.

She had brought them from Madingley early in October, after having in their own phraseology, " done them well." She had mounted them for the opening day of the South Hants Foxhounds, and she had given them all the gaiety that a rural district could offer, and now they were delighted to be in London, and not in Eaton Square.

" I should have died of boredom if I had found myself back in the family mausoleum," was Julia's undutiful

remark, as she and Clementina sat at breakfast with Aunt Elaine in the little dining-room.

They had the ground floor all to themselves at this, as at most hours in the day, for Mary breakfasted alone in the room where the greater part of her life had been spent when she was Conway Field's reading girl. She loved the room for associations that often made her sad, but with a soothing sadness—tender thoughts of a friend who had been kind and of hours that had been happy.

After breakfast and the indispensable newspapers, she gave an hour to letters which she dictated to Frominger —who answered many others at his own discretion—and to her own private correspondence, which was not voluminous. It was not till noon that she was ready for Elaine, who was so placid and unexacting as to be practically non-existent, and the two girls who were full of suggestions and entreaties for something new.

"It is too lovely staying with a friend who is the fashion," said the candid Julia, as Peter Frominger carried off a basketful of cards and notes, which were to be answered immediately. Mary's business-like way of answering invitations amused her new friends, who told each other that this Tremayne girl must have graduated in an office before she became Mr. Field's reader.

"Girls of old family often have to earn their living," the fine ladies said, and expressed their admiration.

She was the fashion; her story was romantic, everyone declared, though all they knew of her story was that she had been Mr. Field's salaried reader, and that he had left her fifty thousand a year and one of the finest houses in London—a house that she was keeping up as such a house ought to be kept, and doing her duty as an entertainer.

"Since Mrs. McGregor died there have been no such delightful parties," said one.

"But dear Mrs. Mac was frankly vulgar, and Mary is exquisite," said another.

Mary was the fashion. She had refused to be presented, although her presentation had been urged as a duty by more than one busybody.

" Her father wrote political articles for the *Edinboro'*," someone explained, " and I daresay she is at heart a socialist."

" She is too thick with Austin Sedgwick to be anything else," said another. " I have heard they go slumming together. She has a little car painted invisible green that she keeps on purpose for Poplar and Ratcliff Highway, and she will refuse the smartest dinner-party to go and hear Sedgwick spout at a dinky little hall in Bethnal Green."

" I suppose it will end with her marrying him."

" I don't know about that. The old man left his two nephews equally well off."

" So whichever it is, she'll keep the money in the family."

Mary was the fashion, and people liked to talk about her, and make little jokes about her, pretending to be her most intimate friends. Women talked of her as " Mary " who had only been once in the same room with her. She went everywhere, no party was considered *chic* without her ; and she was always gay and amused with nothings. The life was so utterly new to her, and perhaps she liked to escape thought. She had thought too much in long morning hours before Garland brought her tea—in that calm time when she was only Mr. Field's reader. Mr. Field's money had changed her into a person of distinction —change as wonderful as Cinderella's when she brought the other glass slipper out of her kitchen wench's pocket.

Austin sometimes wondered at the change in her, and hoped this new world of trivial interests and trivial aims would not spoil her.

She was not even beginning to be spoilt so far, he told himself, when she went among his East End people with him. They had frequent excursions to that Greater London. For it was quite true that they often went slumming together in that modest little car people had heard of.

He took care that she should not see horrible sights or hear horrible language. But he let her see what

poverty really meant—not in the lowest depths where it changed men and women into beasts, and killed every instinct of purity, every upward-looking thought; not in the black abyss of despair, but in that dull drab world of narrow streets, where every house is of the same pattern, and where nothing bright or fair to look upon remains, since the pinch of penniless days must carry everything of value to the pawnbroker's shop. Mary talked with lean spinsters and dejected widows and made friends with families of fatherless children. She took little notes in her pocket-book of the things that were wanting in the shabby house and the clothes that were needed for the starved bodies, so that a day or two afterwards the children thought a fairy had been there, and the weeping mother talked of one of God's angels.

Mary heard lectures, and attended "happy evenings" and tried to understand. She felt the pulses of that greater London, and went back to her splendour in better spirits than after the most successful party in Mayfair, the party where there were celebrated people whom she wanted to meet.

"Such sad houses, and so little would brighten them." That was the refrain of her song, as the car rushed back to the westward, while Austin saw her smile in the lamplight, and could guess the current of her thoughts.

If Mary was the fashion, the Rastac was also the fashion during that gay autumn season, while the House was thrashing out questions which interested only politicians and journalists, and while the people who thought that to be amused was the first necessity of life were on the watch for new people and new things.

The Rastac was the fashion just as Mary was, and money was the factor in both cases: in hers money to be looked at and enjoyed, jewels and smart clothes, exquisite dinners, and theatre parties of eight or ten, with little suppers after the play—not at an hotel where one had to bid good-bye in the middle of an animated sentence at the striking of a clock, but in the little dining-room at Warburton House, where one might stay till Mrs. Halling's yawns became

too much in evidence, and the silver-sweet bells of an Italian timepiece were chiming the third quarter after one. Then, of course, one was shocked with oneself, and went away in a burst of apologies. The play, the talk after supper, had been too delightful, dear Mary must forgive them—and dear Mrs. Halling, who was looking half-dead with weariness.

Elaine did not deny the deadness, but in the midst of a stifled yawn confessed that she was used to country hours.

Jewels and laces to look at, nice things to eat, the most popular brand of champagne—stalls at one's favourite theatre—such was the form Mary's money took for her friends.

Rayner had a form that came nearer home to one. He could do more than spend money upon his friends. He could help them to make money. John Law in his day of success, was not more popular in Paris than the Rastac in a certain not too exclusive set in London.

It was the women who ran after him, the women who talked of his " magnetism," and petted and flattered him, and believed in him, as a kind of stock-exchange conjuror, who could shake slips of paper in a hat and turn them to ingots. Shares bought for five pounds to-day, and sold for thirty this day week. That was Jack Rayner's magnetism. The men were doubtful and shrugged their shoulders, some of them : but even among the wiser sex there were a great many who believed in the fellow's clairvoyance, and who went banco on some of those promising enterprises in the great southern continent—companies for electric lighting where there had been only gas—companies for incandescent gas where electric light had failed—companies for turning tea into rubber—or rubber into coffee—motor-bus companies—overhead railway companies in Bolivia—cattle-raising companies in the Argentine, and companies for producing beet-sugar in Ecuador.

There was not a rood of that mighty continent, from the Pacific to the Atlantic, from Patagonia to Venezuela, with which John Rayner did not profess himself familiar.

He knew the capabilities of every climate and every soil, the things that would grow and the things that wouldn't, the things that were wanted or not wanted.

He was wonderful! That was what people said of him, and having once made up their minds about that, they threw their cheques into the conjuror's hat, and waited for the ingots to come out. He was a fine speaker of the flamboyant order, and could enliven dry statistics and analytical finance with rare bursts of eloquence that intoxicated the weaker brains among his hearers. As the chairman of a new-fledged company he was irresistible.

And so far these companies of his, still in their infancy, had been doing well, because there were always people who believed in this new John Law. He wanted no advertisements, however startling the enterprise; it was enough for a few women who ran after him to make a few hundreds to set the ball rolling. Before Mrs. Brown's sudden gains had gone to pay an importunate dressmaker, Mrs. Jones was expatiating upon the fortune that lady had made in the city, thanks to Rayner's financial genius; and Mrs. Robinson had stories of friends, stone-broke a month ago, who were now living at the rate of ten thousand a year.

This wonderful person followed the footsteps of Mary Tremayne. Wherever she appeared Jack Rayner was likely to be seen in her wake. He was a haunting presence, a shadow that might be looked for in any crowd where Miss Tremayne was to be found. People noticed this fact, and it was quite enough to establish the idea that these two exceptional persons were going to marry each other.

It was so natural that they should marry, and it would be so romantic. People were longing for something romantic—something to talk about, something that would permit of a good deal of gush, and just a spice of ridicule.

"They are both such wonderful creatures. He belongs to nobody—just stands alone, and does everything off his

own bat. She may be a Tremayne, with the blood of Crusaders in her veins, but who knows how she was brought up, or what she was doing before she was Conway Field's salaried reader? Cornwall is not a large county, but one never meets anyone who knows anything about her. She has the Tremayne arms on her silver—yet one has it on the best authority that till Mr. Field's will was made public she was only known as Mary Smith."

John Rayner was pursuing her, and she knew it, and defied him, and perhaps even enjoyed the excitement. It was a silent battle that she was fighting, and she never looked handsomer than when she was moving about a crowded room talking to acquaintances without number, but always contriving to evade her pursuer.

George Bertram was there sometimes, and she knew that he was watching her, and was there on purpose to watch her and the haunting presence. He would try to get near her, and they would shake hands, and they would talk for five minutes—just a few trivial sentences about the room and the people who were there—and he would drift away, but only to watch Rayner from another part of the room. He was at least spared the annoyance of seeing her talking with the Rastac—for she showed consummate art in avoiding him, and her distant recognition was freezing enough to keep any man at arm's-length.

There was a feverish excitement for Mary in such a night—when these two men were in the same room with her. Already the little autumn season—the time of big shoots in Scotland and Yorkshire and big races at Newmarket, was over. The parliamentary session was dragging its slow length to a close after a prolonged illustration of how not to do it, and Mary Tremayne was contemplating a winter in Rome, with the Sedgwick girls for her companions, and Elaine for her lady-in-waiting.

"After all, there won't be much doing in my darling garden between now and March," Mrs. Halling told her friends, "and I have never seen Rome. It was a dream of dear Walter's to take me there, but he couldn't afford the travelling expenses for us both, so he had to go there

alone. It was absolutely necessary for his Roman tragedy. How could he write his great act till he had seen the Forum ? "

" I wonder whether Shakespeare ever saw the Forum ? " said one superior person. " Some people think that he went to Scotland with a strolling company, and that he must have seen Dunsinane. But, unless he was Bacon, I have my doubts about Italy."

" You will have a lovely time," said another friend. " Of course, Mary will do you tophole—the best and most recherché hotel—and a forty-horse-power car for rushing about the Campagna."

The Sedgwick girls were enraptured at the prospect of a winter in Rome. Julia had visions of fox-hunting in the Campagna, and fancied herself riding along the Appian Way, with the brush dangling from the off side of her saddle, and an eligible male to chatter with all the way home.

Clementina thought mostly of the nice people, the people in Debrett who were likely to be there, and the chance of Embassy gaieties, that had been so painfully absent during their previous visit.

It was quite absurd of Mary Tremayne to have refused to be presented in May, but as Julia and her sister were both Court-worthy, that didn't so much matter. In the meantime, as Mary was going to pay for everything from the hour they left London, there would be all the more money to spend on their " rig-out." Their father would have to come down handsomely, and perhaps Austin would be kind and remember for once in his life that clothes were wanted in the West End as much as in the East. He was now absolutely wallowing, the sisters said, yet the utmost he had done for the girls was a diamond pendant at Christmas and an amethyst necklace or so at Easter. He had such queer notions—still lived in the same rooms, and in the same way, as when he was a barnacle. And if he were to marry Our Lady of the Slums, meaning Mary, he would be ever so much richer ; but *that* didn't seem to come on.

Mary had a friend in Rome upon whose discretion she thought she could rely—the doctor who had come every other day to sit by Conway Field's sofa, and feel his pulse, and look at him with the eye that can see. He was to find rooms near the Pincian Gardens, and servants, and a motor-car adapted to the work she would want. Her men-servants and Garland were to go with her, but for housemaids and kitchen she would have Romans. She liked the idea of seeing the frank smiles and brilliant eyes and teeth that flashed their whiteness from red lips and olive faces.

Everything was settled. Mrs. Halling had been to say good-bye to her garden, and to amuse the head-gardener by meticulous instructions about work to be done in the winter.

All the fine clothes for the Sedgwick girls had been packed, with much help from Garland, who pitied the maid that had to wait upon such young ladies.

"One maid for the two is cruelty to animals," she told Mrs. Tredgold. "Why, one and a half for each of them would be overworked. My lady doesn't give as much trouble in a week as Miss Julia gives for a single dance—two hours messing about, and going off in a hurry with her right glove only half-buttoned at the last."

Garland opined that a month of such work would kill her. She would rather be an under-housemaid, even if she had to do bedroom fires.

Mary was flying from her enemy. The pursuit had become intolerable. To be hunted down by the man who had blighted her life—the man she could never forgive.

She had thought of a winter in India—just to put so many more miles between her and Rayner, but it seemed to her that Rome was far enough; for though it would be easy enough for him to dog her footsteps there, as in London, it would hardly suit his convenience to leave the city where he was piling up a huge fortune. It would

hardly suit him to turn his back upon the Stock Exchange, while he was, to use his own expression, on the crest of the wave.

She was thinking these thoughts as she sat by the fire in the room where her life had been spent with Conway Field—the room she loved best amid all her splendour; and it was her last day there till the May of another year. Clementina and Julia were finishing their shopping with Elaine Halling, who had a way of leaving her preparations for a journey to the last day, and expecting to do wonders in an afternoon. The Sedgwick girls had gone with her—preferring a smart shop to any other form of entertainment, and promising to keep their aunt up to the mark.

"You wouldn't a bit know what to buy, or what you would want, if you hadn't someone in the know to advise you," Julia told her, and Clementina said that her aunt was capable of leaving London without a warm coat or a fur stole, because she was going to Italy.

"You had better have a pony coat lined with ermine, and we will choose it for you," said the dutiful niece.

They had gone directly after luncheon, and were to have tea in St. James's Street, so Mary was sure of being alone to receive Austin, who was coming to bid her good-bye, and with whom she wanted to have much confidential talk about the things and the people in which they were both so keenly interested: her people, as she was beginning to call some of the patient toilers in that greater London.

The clock on the chimney-piece chimed the quarter after three, and Drayson ushered in a visitor:

"Mr. Rayner."

Mary started to her feet.

"I am not at home to Mr. Rayner," she said, with a flashing look that passed by the visitor to the butler in the background, who affected not to hear her, and quietly withdrew, shutting the door behind him.

"I told that man that I should be at home only to one visitor this afternoon," she said angrily; "but no doubt you have paid him well to disobey my orders."

"Whose fault is it if I did? Not his, at any rate, poor devil! Why do you play such tricks with me, Mary? I have told you that I came back to England to claim you—that I look upon you as my wife—just as much my wife now in the midst of your splendour as you were in the Chelsea lodging-house. My wife by a bond that cannot be broken—the consciousness that we have lived together as man and wife. No woman can forget that—no decent woman."

"I am not likely to forget—so far I told you I agree, but only so far. The bond you refused to legalize shall never be legalized by me. You put the shame of an unmarried wife upon me. Do you think I have forgotten that?"

"You remember only the hard things. You don't remember how I loved you."

"I do!" she said passionately, bursting into tears. "I do remember what your love was like—and that is why I hate you."

"What is the use of hard words, Mary? Wise people never hate each other, for they never know how soon they may come to want each other. You will have to marry me—that is a foregone conclusion—pleased or reluctant, you will have to be my wife. I will hem you round with reasons. I will encompass you with obstacles to any other marriage. You will have to marry me. The world will make you. You may have a will of iron, you may have a soul of fire—but the world is too strong for any woman. The world will make you marry me."

"What do I care for the world—and what does the world care whom I marry?"

"I shall be the driving force behind the world. The world will be my will—the process has begun already—paragraphs—a romantic marriage—wealth and beauty—a man who has made himself a power in certain circles—a woman with a curious history—you must have seen some of these paragraphs!"

"If they were posted on the walls in giant type they

would not affect me—or spoil any marriage you may be thinking of. I shall never marry. The shame you have put upon my life will prevent that. Your threats cannot frighten me. I am no more afraid of you than of the world. I shall go my way to the end—and I fear no man's face."

"You don't know how unpleasant people can make themselves—the people who call themselves society. They have taken you up, made much of you—crowded your parties, sung your praise. Wait till they drop you, as they will when our history has leaked out—the mean surroundings of an unmarried wife. If you refuse to marry me, all those smart friends of yours—and your superior friends too—shall know that you are my cast-off mistress."

"Coward!"

She went quickly to the bell and rang long and loud. He followed her and put his hand upon her arm, the hand that had held her when she was lifted half conscious into the railway carriage at Camelford Road. He let her go the next moment as the door opened and Drayson stood waiting to show him out.

Drayson had earned his bribe, although he might have waited a few minutes longer, and given the intruder a better run for his money.

Mary flung herself into a low chair by the fire and sobbed passionately, with covered face.

She knew for certain that the man who had betrayed her when she was a helpless girl, ignorant of evil, meant to persecute her now that she was a woman strong in the power of knowledge and great wealth.

There was a rapid step in the long gallery, the door opened quickly, and Austin Sedgwick was by her side. The sound of his voice as he knelt beside her increased her agitation. Here was friendship, here was love that would protect her against all the world—if she dared, if she only dared let him defend her.

"Mary, why are you distressed? I met that man upon the stairs—the man who has been haunting you—the

man whose name people are coupling with yours. What has he been saying to you? How did he dare to come here?"

"There is nothing he would not dare. He made me unhappy years ago and he is making me unhappy now."

"Yes, I understand. I have seen him following you about, and I knew he was your first and worst enemy, your only enemy. My darling, be reasonable. You made me promise that I would ask for nothing but your friendship. I have kept my word; but the time has come when I must be something more than a friend. You must give me the only right by which I can protect you—a husband's right."

Her sobs had ceased, but she was trembling violently, and the hand he clasped was deadly cold.

"No, no, no. Impossible! I can never marry while that man lives. If marriage were in question I belong to him, and sooner than let me go, he would brand me with the shame of that bitter past. He would let all my little world know what I was. And people have been so kind to me—I have some friends it would break my heart to lose. I have not been a coward, Austin, I have faced him resolutely and defied him—but I know that he will be relentless—that I am doomed to be a miserable woman for the rest of my life. No, my kindest of friends, you can never be more to me than a friend. If all others turn from me—you can help me, and my business in life must be to make other suffering women just a little happier. If you go on helping me to do that you will help me to live."

"Then I will be your friend—nothing more—but a friend on the watch. Why are you going so far away?"

"I want to put distance between that man and me. His interests are all in London and Paris. I don't think he will follow me to Rome."

Austin was doubtful, but he wanted to comfort and not to frighten her.

"Let me dine with you to-night. There will be some chance of a quiet talk, for my sisters are sure to be full of

nothing but their clothes for Rome, and they will be running upstairs to see that all their finery is packed."

Of course she would be glad for him to spend that last evening with her. She wanted to talk to him about her people down East and in Cornwall. She had so much to say to him about them—so many suggestions about the things that ought to be done while she was away.

"I don't want them to miss me," she said simply.

"You can't prevent them doing that."

He saw that her nerves were quieter—that the agitation in which he had found her had passed—that she was brave again.

XXVIII

JACK RAYNER was, indeed, on the crest of the wave: a wave that carried him wherever he wanted to go —and Lady Cheveril was rapidly becoming impossible.

That is what her friends said, but seen from the outside her progress towards the boundary line of possibility seemed slow.

She was still seen everywhere, and all the old familiar faces were to be seen in her handsome reception rooms, in that new flat which had all the latest inventions in flatland—the most recent thing in fireplaces, the last cry in ceiling and cornice—the quintessential dado. She was such a lucky woman! That is what all her friends said about her. She could do the most foolish things, and there was no one to interfere with her. No husband! That obliging person had died soon after his marriage, and being elderly when he married her, had not left a herd of brothers and sisters to take liberties and give her good advice.

"My poor Tom was almost the last of his race," she told people, who were inclined to wonder if Tom had ever had a race, since there was a legend that he had begun his career in Liverpool as an errand-boy, and had risen step by step to the fine mercantile position that had brought him local distinction and finally made him—after the expenditure of thirty thousand on what he himself denominated a royal 'obby—Sir Thomas: not a common or municipal knight, but a pukha baronet.

He had left his widow well provided for, but not rich

in the twentieth-century acceptation of that thrilling word, not rich enough to be indifferent to losses at Bridge, or to scorn "making a bit" in a flutter on the Stock Exchange.

It was that fancy for making a bit that had drawn a certain set of women about Rayner as moths are drawn to a flame—most of the women for mercenary reasons only. But with Lady Cheveril there had been a stronger attraction than greed of gold—and the flame that had caught her was in the man himself. She made light of him to her friends, and was the first to disparage him from a personal point of view. She admitted that he was "not quite"—but he was useful, and he took such pains to put one on to a good thing. That was the sole reason for one's tolerating his not-quiteness, and asking him to one's parties now and then.

"Now and always, you mean, dear," said Mrs. Hazeldeane. "He almost lives at your flat. If I want to write to him about business I would sooner chance my letter catching him at Flamborough Mansions than in the city."

Lady Cheveril had been obliged of late to put up with speeches of this kind or to cut her dearest friends. The women of her set were free of speech among their intimates. They said things to each other that had to be passed off with a laugh—or one would be always quarrelling with one's favourite pal. Lady Cheveril hated quarrels, and didn't much mind what her friends said about Jack—so long as they did not steal him from her.

There was a tacit understanding about that. He might help them in the city—put them on to good things—but they must not lure him away from her. If they asked him to their houses, she must be asked too. She very soon made them understand that they must play the game. And that is how it was that Mr. Rayner had become such an important person in a somewhat trumpery society.

But he had his chances in a better society—in houses which Lady Cheveril did not enter—houses to which the Rastac was admitted for various motives, houses where he was to be seen at my lord's dinners, as well as at my lady's

receptions from ten-thirty to twelve, where there was only just standing room.

There were evenings when Lady Cheveril went to bed at nine o'clock with one of her headaches, and as strong a dose of veronal as her maid would give her, after seeing Rayner at tea-time and being told that he had to dine in Grosvenor Square and to look in at two or three parties after dinner.

"I can't think how you can care for such silly herds," she would say pettishly. "Surely a quiet little dinner and a rubber with some of my nicest friends and me would rest you more after a long day in the city."

"I don't want to be rested, *ma douce*. I have to be moving on, and there is no mob of men and women in which I may not find someone useful. You often accuse me of hating books, because I won't read the novel that all you women are raving about. Men are my books, Laura, and I have to keep turning the pages."

She had to put up with his indifference—to take what he would give, and ask no more, hope no more from a nature she too well understood.

He was an absolute egoist, but he charmed her. He was capable, she feared, of villainous conduct, shifty, dishonourable—but she could not live without his society. He was her magnetic man. She had gone about talking of his magnetism lightly enough at the first as a mere *façon de parler*, but she knew now that she was magnetized. Her friends were right when they told each other that there was no harm in her; nothing of that which their world would call harm; but she was, nevertheless, making herself impossible. She was too silly for words. She was doing things that even friendship cannot sanction.

Imprimis, he was always at her flat—going in and out as if it belonged to him. He had extra overcoats hanging in her hall. He abused her furniture—hoped she would clear out the whole lot—*tout le tremblement*—and let some good city firm come in and give her chairs that one could sit on, and a table on which one could write a letter without its shaking like an aspen leaf. "And get rid of

your Marie Antoinette secrétaire, that won't hold a quire of paper, and all your fantastical contrivances for cumbering the floor, and making it impossible for a man to walk up and down while he talks to you. Men were not made to sit still and twiddle their thumbs—a strong man was no more meant to be quiet than a steam-engine. In the city we have rooms where we can walk about and feel the strength of our legs. Your West End drawing-rooms are like the bric-à-brac shops, or squirrels' cages, to a *man*."

He was fond of talking of himself as a man. It was his excuse for bad manners, for never going to church, for dressing loudly—and the women whom he had put in the way of gaining a few hundreds accepted his excuse and went on calling him wonderful.

He would talk in this reckless way to Lady Cheveril before a tea-party. That domineering tone suggested something *louche*, Mrs. Armytage said, but Mrs. Zabulon was certain there was nothing really wrong. Laura was *toquée*—Laura had always been a foolish creature—a *tête de linotte*, nothing worse.

Rayner's steady pursuit of Mary Tremayne had been observed and talked about. And then there had been the paragraphs, and a snapshot or two—though no photographer had been lucky enough to snap them together. People had talked volumes, and there had been those who declared that the event was only a question of time. The marriage would be in every way so suitable.

Meanwhile poor Lady Cheveril was heart-broken. It was she, of course, whom Rayner ought to marry. She was not more than five or six years his senior, and she was still handsome, and socially she had made herself his slave.

Even he himself knew that she was his best advertiser —that she had helped to keep him on the crest of the wave, and he told her that he was not ungrateful. But the word marriage—even the word love had never been on his lips. They were pals, nothing more. He told her that friendship, a strong loyal friendship, was not im-

possible for a sensible man and woman. It was only fools who could not understand or realize such a tie.

" I suppose you have a good many of such friendships," she answered once, with a touch of bitterness, " a good many pals just as loyal as I am."

" Never ! No, Laura, you are the first, and you shall be the last. I have had men friends and to spare, some of them false as hell. But you are the first woman I have ever called my friend—the first to whom I would come in a run of bad luck—the first who has ever seen my face in one of my dark hours, when I have been on the brink of losing faith in myself."

" You must never do that, Jack, never, never."

" No—when I do, I shall be finished. It will be u. p. with Argentine Jack then."

He liked to talk to her. It relieved him when things had gone askew in the city and his head was on fire. It was not like talking to the child-wife in the Chelsea lodging, whose wondering eyes, lifted hopelessly to his face as he talked of financial enterprises that were to make his fortune, had irritated him. This was a woman of the world—had learnt something of finance and of its risks from her commercial husband. There was some satisfaction in talking to Laura Cheveril.

She had altered her drawing-room to please him. All the superfluous furniture had been banished. Other rooms in that flat might be crowded and made uncomfortable, but here from wall to wall of the two rooms there was a pathway for restless feet. He could range from wall to wall, under the central archway backwards and forwards like a jaguar in his cage.

He came every day when his work in the city was over, came at tea-time, though he did not drink tea—a deeper draught was necessary for a man who had been talking volumes at a meeting of shareholders. So there were always syphons and decanters, and tall tumblers on the side table—a Jeypore tray that reflected the firelight in ruddy gold, and cut crystal that sparkled and flashed. There was a table with solid legs for the Jeypore tray, and

nothing shook or rattled when Jack refilled his glass for a second long drink. He rarely went beyond the second. He had to take care of himself.

Sometimes he brought her a present, a jewel of value, and of finer taste than might have been expected from one who was not quite a gentleman.

He would drop the white velvet case in her lap as she sat at her tea-table, and startle her by the richness of his gift—the single ruby, in a pendant, set clear, and hanging from a chain that looked like a thread.

"You should not buy me such things, Jack," she exclaimed, pretending to be vexed. "You will only make people talk."

"They will always talk about a handsome woman. What does it matter?"

"I'm afraid it matters a good deal. Women are such cats! My friends have begun to say nasty things to me. I'm afraid you had better not come here every day—and yet I shall miss you awfully."

"And I shall miss my hour's talk with a clever woman, *à cœur ouvert*. But we won't offend Mrs. Grundy if she is still alive. I thought the nineteenth century had seen the last of her; I thought she was dead and forgotten like sixpenny newspapers and hansom cabs."

Laura Cheveril was angry when her friends criticized Rayner's manners, or his clothes, returning always to their odious jargon about men who were good form and men who were not.

"I would be the last to call him a bounder," one pert young person would say, "and I agree with you, dear, that he is splendid; but he is not like the other men we know. He says things that jar—that one would rather he had not said."

Even such twaddle as this rankled, for she loved the man—and would have had the world at his feet. Sometimes she tried to school him, but that always ended badly.

"Why do you wear that large diamond ring?" she asked one evening, while he was on his march from wall to wall.

" It is much too big. I can see it flashing from the other end of the room. It is much too conspicuous—only fit for the stage—and not then in a modern play. Why do you wear such a thing ? It makes people talk. English gentlemen don't wear diamonds."

" I am not an English gentleman."

" But you would like to be taken for a gentleman."

" *Je m'en fiche.* I would like to be taken for a man—and, by God ! nobody shall ever take me for something less."

He was incorrigible, and Lady Cheveril admired him tremendously. If he wore the wrong clothes he looked so handsome in them that she must forgive him ; and the ring was his only sin in the way of ornament.

" It is my mascot," he told Lady Cheveril.

It was a yellow diamond, a large square stone, table-cut, and it was set in a rim of brilliants shaped like a snake, with the small wicked-looking white head peeping over the edge of the broad yellow stone.

" Do let me look at it," Lady Cheveril said, and he held out his hand to her. " No, I mean in my own hand. Take it off, Jack. I want a good look at the setting."

" I never take it off. It is my mascot. You don't want me to part with my luck ? "

" I wish you would give me a mascot. Those last shares have done no good."

" You took them against my advice. That is the way with women. One helps them to make a bit of money, and before they have had time to spend it, they begin to think they are cleverer than the man who gave them the tip. They want to speculate on their own account, and get chattering with other women, take some fool's advice, and put their money on the wrong horse."

The next time her friends spoke of the offending ring, she told them that he wore it for luck.

" I don't think the people who have put their money into his companies would be quite happy if they knew he was that sort of man—a man who trusts to luck," said one rather venomous dowager.

"Napoleon believed in his star," Lady Cheveril exclaimed, flushing angrily. "Jack is hard-headed enough, and all his companies are doing splendidly."

Her heart beat high as she said this, and the flush on her cheeks deepened. He had talked rather wildly sometimes in his march across the carpet. He had dropped strange phrases that troubled her.

He had talked of "pulling the devil by the tail," of "window-dressing," of "washing one hand with the other."

She had been constrained to ask him what the latter phrase meant.

"Never mind that, Laura. A bit of city slang."

"But I like to understand. I can sympathize with you better if I understand."

He did not answer her. He was in one of his strange moods—talking by fits and starts, with intervals of silence and of abstraction so deep that it was useless to speak to him, since he never heard, but just went marching up and down with his swinging stride, as if unconscious of one's presence.

Lady Cheveril was beginning to feel uneasy about him. Yet the gloomy fit never lasted long enough to justify actual anxiety. If he were in low spirits one day, he was all talk and animation on the next, vivid and brilliant as ever, at his best.

He was always engaged in the evening, dining here or there, mostly at men's parties, or *tête-à-tête* with some man at his club. He was just as much in request as ever; and he told this devoted friend that his companies were going strong—a fact attested by the cheques that he brought her from time to time for her dividends. They were not very large cheques, for her investments had been small, but she called them "soothing," and she rejoiced to know that he was prospering.

But one afternoon in March, when he came to her before the friendly twilight began, she was distressed at seeing a change in the splendid face—a haggard look that was new to her.

" Something must have gone wrong with you, Jack," she said, laying her hand upon his shoulder, as he stood by the table with the decanters. " You are not looking a bit like yourself. Let me get you some coffee. Holtz makes such good coffee ; it will pick you up better than that stuff."

He had the decanter in his hand, and he put it down quickly, with a disgusted air.

" If you are going to preach temperance, I had better go to my club when I leave the city. I have been drinking coffee all day—strong enough to blow a man's head off. Don't look at me like that, Laura. There is nothing the matter with me, except overwork. There was a circus man who used to drive forty horses, five abreast, through Paris. He was a good whip and had been born in the sawdust, but it wasn't easy work, even for him."

She understood his parable.

" You mean you have too many schemes on hand."

" I have enough to keep my brain at work, my dear—but you needn't be afraid. I know how to manage my team. Your little investments are quite safe."

" I was not thinking of myself."

They were still standing by the little table, facing each other. He took her in his arms suddenly, and kissed her for the first time.

" Don't be angry, Laura. It is a friend's kiss—you are a good sort."

He was gone before she could answer.

His first kiss ! And how careful he had been to tell her that it did not mean love. Yet her heart was throbbing as it had never throbbed before—thrilled by that first kiss.

XXIX

GEORGE BERTRAM was at a loose end. The phrase was a common one with him, and his cousin was tired of hearing it.

"Come, George, don't let's have any more of your howling," he said, when the already successful K.C. had flung himself into a chair as savagely as if he had a quarrel with his friend's furniture.

"Upon my soul I am ashamed of you," Austin went on, looking down at the frowning face—so handsome in feature and colour, so disfigured by the unquiet mind at the back of it.

"What is it you want?"

"Happiness."

"Well, that is your own lookout. You must earn it. You have money to burn, but happiness is not to be bought. It is something we have to work for and win, if not by one kind of work, by another. There must be something wrong with your work if it doesn't make you happy, or at least contented."

"Don't talk of my work, for God's sake. I loathe it. I have loathed it almost from the beginning—and I shouldn't have stuck it a second year, except on account of my father. He had taken such a lot of trouble about me, and was so glad in his jolly old jovial way that I had done pretty well. I think the men of his generation must have a different kind of blood in their veins—a better sort than ours. They can do big things, and they can take pleasure in small things. They may have worked like galley slaves, but they can get up after a public dinner

and make a speech that rouses the sleepy echoes in the roof, and sets the tables in a roar. They have an infinite capacity for being happy."

"Try to imitate them, then. You could not have a better example than your father."

"Oh, J. B. is a good sort. If I didn't see how happy he is, I should be inclined to honour him as a saint and martyr."

"A martyr?"

"He has put up with my mother. Did you think of that, Austin, when you came to the show on their silver wedding? For five-and-twenty years that strong brain has brought itself down to the level of a woman's small talk three or four nights a week—for he has not dined out half so often as other men of his calibre. He has not played cards at his club after dinner. He has allowed my mother to call for him, and bring him home in time to dress. And he has sat by the fireside like John Anderson my Jo, and listened to my mother's twaddle. Oh, I know she is an angel, and that she worships him. *Tout ça, c'est connu*, but for such a man as my father to endure such evenings, and escape softening of the brain is next door to a miracle."

"It is only egotists like you, George, who want to go through life without being bored."

George gave another of his dismal yawns that was the next thing to a howl.

"I don't believe I was meant to be such a dreary selfish, unprofitable beast," he groaned. "I believe I was meant to be happy."

"You may be happy still. You have the future in front of you."

"No, I have nothing in front of me but the past; my long history of failure. I have tried everything and chucked almost everything, or everything has chucked me."

Austin did not try to reason with him. He knew his man too well. And George might, after all, be one of that large company of men who are foredoomed to fall short of expectation—who never come up to the measure of their

capabilities. He had done wonders in the Law Courts at the first—had done brilliant work—and then he had grown tired, and had begun to disappoint people. The great solicitors no longer saw in him the man who was to surpass his father.

He had made his mark in the House. His maiden speech had been a fine example of strong reasoning and free from rhetoric, polished and yet solid. But he had lost his temper in a subsequent debate, forgetting that he was not in court. Then he found out that Parliament bored him. It was not worth his while, nothing was worth his while.

He walked away from Austin's rooms seeing—not red, but black—everything behind him and in front of him was black as ink.

Mary was in Rome. He had tried to see more of her in that autumn season which was just over, but she had avoided him, just as resolutely as she had avoided John Rayner, the adventurer whose pursuit George had watched and understood.

"She is the only woman upon this earth who could make me happy," he told himself. "The only one, and she would not."

He walked about the streets for an hour after he left Austin, and then went into a theatre, the first he came to.

He heard gay music and women's voices as he went along the passage to the stalls.

"The usual kind of rubbish," he thought, "the usual imbecilities set to music."

He went to his place in the last row, and looked at the stage, and listened idly to the quartette that was being sung by three women with light girlish voices and a man with a fine baritone. The melody was bright and gay, and the music cheered him somehow—the handsome faces and pretty clothes and graceful figures—the comedian's humour, the brilliancy of colour and light, exorcised those blue devils that had been his constant companions of late, and he looked and listened, and was glad he had chanced upon that particular theatre.

" Rubbish, but pleasant rubbish ! "

The act finished and the audience sprang into light. The theatre was full, stalls, private boxes, dress circle—the piece was evidently a success. Well-dressed women, the usual men, the youths who have been called by every manner of absurd name and who yet are exactly the same—the name changes—the species remains.

The house was full. George stuck his glass in his eye, and looked round, a slow deliberate look that swept the half circle of faces and figures and jewels and clothes, and that stopped all at once and fixed itself on a face and figure in the corner of one of the two private boxes on the grand tier.

Eyes that belonged to his life's history were looking at him. Lips that he had kissed with the lover's first rapture were smiling at him, kindly, with a bewitching archness, as if the lapse of years meant nothing to that vivid life. Immortal youth might have been there, so little mark had the years made upon that peerless beauty.

It was Miriam Stanhope who was looking at him with a smile that invited his attention, and in the next moment the beautiful head bent graciously—just enough to tell him he was recognized.

He sprang up, made his way out of the stalls as quickly as he could, without behaving badly to all those prettily-dressed women who had to suffer from such disturbances.

He hardly knew why he was so eager to find his way to her box. She was just the last person he wanted to see. She was ancient history. She represented the initial chapter in the story of a life that had been a series of failures. She had spoilt his life, and he had never wanted to see her face again—would not have gone half a mile out of his way to see her—but she was there, and it might amuse him to waste a few minutes with her. After all, he had a certain curiosity about her career between the day she flung him over so heartlessly, and to-night, when he saw her dazzling and beautiful as ever: the same radiant vision as on that first night among overdressed men and half-naked women at the " Gilded Lily."

She was not alone in her box. There was a woman with her—a modest little creature in black lace, who was sitting with her back to the stage, and who drew her chair into the background as if to make room for him.

"Please don't let me disturb you," he said. "I have only come for a few minutes before the act begins."

"You were surprised to see me, I dare say," Miriam said, making play with her fan.

He thought her hand trembled ever so little and yet he could hardly believe that she was agitated by this unexpected meeting, she who had thrown him off like a soiled glove.

"Nothing is surprising—all roads cross in the labyrinth of life. If I am surprised it is at your not looking a day older since you started on your yachting tour."

"The sea keeps one young. My husband was devoted to his yacht, and half our lives were spent on board her. It was our only home."

"Except those delightful hotels along the Riviera, just the most perfect home anyone could have," said the person in black.

"Delightful, because one could change them at an hour's notice. If one was bored at Beaulieu, a few words on the telephone, and they were ready for one at Cannes. I don't think I was meant to live long in one place. At least that is what I always felt while Fred was alive. He was by nature a rover."

The curtain was going up, and George moved towards the door.

She gave him her hand.

"Good-night, Mr. Bertram. I'm glad you don't think me much changed in all these years."

"What have Syrens to do with time? Calypso is one of the Immortals."

"Don't begin by calling me disagreeable names, but come and see me and let us talk of the years that are gone."

"I never talk of the dead," George answered with a gloomy look. "Good-night, Mrs. Stanhope."

"My name is Apperley. I have been a widow more than a year. Be sure you call before I leave for the South. I am at the Coburg Hotel."

He did not answer, nor did he linger over that new sensation of meeting hands, a hand out of a remote past.

He saw another act of the musical comedy, but the music had lost all charm for him. Indeed, the music of a new and popular school that was being played in the orchestra was not the music he heard. He was listening to a waltz that had been the rage when the "Gilded Lily" was the favourite resort of golden youth.

It was all dreary, dead, and done with. He felt more disgusted with life than before his meeting with Miriam, and his blue devils were at their bluest when he went home to his chambers in Paper Buildings. He lived in chambers now. He could no longer support home. His mother bored him, and he preferred dining with his father at one of his clubs to meeting him in Portman Square.

He was a bad sleeper at his best, and he slept a little worse than usual to-night. But just in the grey and tardy dawn, when he had tried one of his bedside books after another and tossed them away in disgust, he burst out laughing. "After all, if I was a fool, I had my excuse —she is the most beautiful thing God ever made!"

And then he thought of the two women who had rejected him—and compared the two types. Wide, wide as the poles asunder, one all clay and the other all spirit.

He did not call at the "Coburg." He was engaged in a case that interested him as much as anything ever interested him now. One of those Will cases which involve domestic treason, and the darker side of everyday life. People were talking of the trial, and George might have been a star at any of the dinners to which he was invited. But he hated smart parties, and was not to be tempted by the most brilliant assembly of bigwigs in London.

Thoughts of Miriam flashed across his mind sometimes—so little changed, superlatively handsome still—in her

particular style—the style that undergraduates and young soldiers rave about—the style for which successive Squires go down the steep and easy hill that leads to the bankruptcy court.

"It was my style once," he thought, "and I was as big an ass as the U.G. on King's Parade—with a 'dog who knew him for the fool he was.'" But the haunting face is not Miriam's face. The haunting face has a mind behind it, a mind that lights the eyes and trembles on the lips.

This was how he thought of Mrs. Stanhope, now Mrs. Apperley, in wakeful nights, when an overworked brain made sleep impossible.

The Will case was interesting him in spite of himself. There were difficulties, mysteries even, and it was a case worth troubling about. Everybody was talking about it, men at the clubs and in the House buttonholed him, and tried to get him to express an opinion—though they got nothing but black looks for their pains.

And in the watches of the night, when he was tired of thinking of that web of treachery and falsehood which he was gradually unravelling by the aid of an extraordinary number of witnesses, he thought from sheer weariness of the fair Mrs. Apperley.

She will be beautiful to the last, like Ninon de Lenclos, and her task is all the easier, since she has no mind. Ninon was witty, so must have had a mind, and yet she kept her beauty.

At last curiosity, one Saturday afternoon, led his steps to the Coburg Hotel. He wanted to see how his old flame looked by daylight. He had only seen her in the glare of the theatre, and daylight might mean revelations—paint, beauty-doctors.

He called at four o'clock, hoping to find her alone. No doubt she would have women dropping in to tea. He remembered that she did not love solitude—she wanted to be amused—and that quiet little woman in black would hardly amuse her. The widow of a rich man, she was sure to attract friends, of a sort.

She was at home, and would see Mr. Bertram—the question being quietly asked and answered on the telephone. Her rooms were on the third floor, looking over roofs and tree-tops and into the blue of a March sky. A spacious sitting-room full of spring flowers—daffodils, tulips. Tables littered with books.

Mrs. Apperley was seated at a desk writing. She laid down her pen and rose to meet him. The little woman who was with her at the theatre had been sitting near her with a book in her hand, and rose at the same time.

"You have not been very gallant," Miriam said. "I should have thought when a friend of the long ago asked you to call, you would have been a shade more *empressé*."

"I have been up to my eyes——"

"In this tremendous Will case? Yes, I understand. I see you are leading counsel for the plaintiff, and that there is half a million at stake."

There was a difference in the tone of her voice. It had been rather a pretty voice, he thought, in the days when she was Miriam Stanhope, a light gay voice, with a tendency to become ever so little shrill when she was excited —and in those days she never talked long without exciting herself. The tone was graver now, the voice deeper. She spoke somewhat slowly and with a touch of languor, like a person accustomed to listen rather than to talk, to sit at ease and allow people to amuse her. Certainly there was a change.

"She is playing the *grande dame*," he thought. "What an actress she is, and what a pity she hadn't gone on the stage."

All the comedy actresses of recent seasons flashed across his mind as he talked to her. She was handsomer than the handsomest of them, and there was something superb about her that would have made her success certain.

"I had no time to introduce you to my friend Miss Mason, the other night," she said presently, smiling at the little woman in grey.

He bowed and the grey lady responded with a gracious

movement of her neat little head. Whatever Miss Mason might be, he made up his mind that she was a lady, whom circumstances had brought into companionship with Mrs. Apperley.

"You will have to be attentive to Miss Mason, if you and I are to renew our old friendship," Miriam said. "Florence Mason and I have been bosom friends for a good many years. We have roamed the world over together."

"I fear my chief merit with Mr. and Mrs. Apperley lay in my being a good sailor," Miss Mason said, in a matter-of-fact tone.

"A great advantage for us—but your smallest merit," said Miriam. "My husband hated a bad sailor; it tried his nice easy temper sorely, when some silly woman at Cannes or San Remo implored him to take her for a cruise, and turned green before we sat down to luncheon. There was a short shrift for that sort of person. She was handed over to the steward, and my maid, and she was never allowed to set foot on our deck again. You remember, Florence?"

"Poor Mr. Apperley. Yes, he was merciless to bad sailors, though he was always kind, and never let them know how he hated them."

After a little more talk about the yacht and the strange places they had seen, Miss Mason remembered she had a letter to write, and slipped out of the room.

Then there was a silence for some moments, and George rose and took up his hat.

"Pray don't go. Florence will come back in a few minutes to give us our tea. See," pointing to the clock, "it is nearly the witching hour."

"You are very kind, but I must get back to chambers. I may have people waiting for me."

"Not to-day. This is a *dies non*. If you won't sit by my hearth for an hour, I shall think that you have never forgiven me—that you are still angry with me."

"Don't let us talk about forgiveness. When you threw me over, your manner of doing it was a shock; but I am

something of a stoic, and I took the only course open to me, and I ruled you out of my life."

"And you have never been sorry. You have never regretted the days when we were so happy together?" she asked in a plaintive tone.

"No more than I have regretted any other dream. I may regret my youth sometimes, but not the folly that went with my youth."

"You are indeed a stoic. But I am not as hard as you imagine. For even in my placid life with the best of husbands there were times when my thoughts went back to the old days—most of all when the yacht touched at the places where we had been together: those dear little towns in Italy which you so loved."

"But of which you so soon were weary. Why talk of the past, Mrs. Apperley? You have prospered and been happy since you escaped the horrors of domestic life in South Kensington. And I, too, have done well. We can both afford to blot one uncomfortable page out of our lives."

Miss Mason reappeared before Miriam could reply, and there was tea, and a few minutes of animated talk, just long enough for George to discover that the little woman in grey was a somewhat superior person, who could talk of books or of politics with judgment and aplomb.

"Florence reads all the new books, and remembers all the old ones," Mrs. Apperley said patronizingly, but with a certain respect for the superior mind. "She has a wonderful memory. She was my guide, philosopher and friend in all our wanderings. She knew the history of every place we visited, and could make quite dull little towns interesting."

George Bertram could understand that the wealthy American's widow had been improving herself with the aid of Miss Mason, who was not quite the common kind of companion. Miriam's accent was more refined, and that air of Bohemianism natural to the atmosphere in which he had first known her had given place to a primness that sat

curiously upon the woman he had first seen waltzing at the "Gilded Lily." He smiled as he walked back to the Temple, thinking how strange it seemed to have been sitting at tea with his old love, talking of Shakespeare and the musical glasses.

Certainly Miriam had suffered a sea-change that was almost a transformation, and had become a person that a man could take into a friend's drawing-room as his wife without being put to the blush; but it seemed to him that the old charm had evaporated under Miss Mason's influence. The chic, the animal spirits of the old Miriam had suited her sparkling beauty. The beauty was there still, mellowed, not coarsened by the passage of time, but the brilliance was gone—the magnetic power, the something indefinable, that belongs to Calypso, and Cleopatra, and all the other syrens. Miriam now was more like Helen of Troy, the eminently respectable young person whom circumstances, and not her wicked will, had placed in a false position.

"I like the old Miriam best," he thought. "This one will never turn me into a beast."

He did not mean to see her again. He thought it was something on his part to have been civil, and he knew that she would have been better pleased if he had poured the passionate wrath of an ill-used lover on her head. He had punished her more by his absolute indifference than he could have done by the bitterest reproaches.

The trial went on for another week, and he had no time to remember Mrs. Apperley's existence, and hardly time to scribble a brief line of refusal to her invitation to dine with her and do a theatre after dinner. Florence had told her of a Pinero comedy that it was one's duty to see.

The trial ended in a triumph for the plaintiff and his leading counsel. The result had hinged in a great measure upon the expert evidence, whether the testator had been of a disposing mind when he signed the will that left his property in so unexpected a manner, and George Bertram had shown himself a master of the most recondite details in the medical aspect of the case—had demonstrated that

the testator was not *compos mentis* at the time, and by inference that the doctor who tried to prove his sanity by hard swearing was a disgrace to his profession.

It was the cross-examination of this witness which constituted the leading counsel's crowning triumph, and his father unreservedly praised him at their nine o'clock dinner on the night that ended the prolonged trial.

He had to call on Mrs. Apperley after refusing to dine with her, and this time he found her in a bevy of women, having happened to call upon her " day."

Among the women he discovered that Lady Cheveril who took John Rayner to other people's houses, and whom he remembered on the night when he saw the sudden change in Mary's face and knew that Lady Cheveril's friend was Miss Tremayne's enemy.

The other women would talk of nothing but Rayner, and were insatiable in their questioning. Laura knew all about his schemes, Laura had him in her pocket. It was in vain that she told them she knew nothing about his business affairs—" except that everything he touches seems to turn to gold."

" Seems ! " cried a lady who had invested a hundred pounds, the savings of a lucky week-end at auction-bridge. " I hope it isn't a question of seeming. You scare me, Laura. Is the gold going to turn into withered leaves ? "

" I know nothing of Jack's affairs in the city."

" Then what in Heaven's name do you talk about ? I thought he came straight to you as soon as the Stock Exchange closed, every afternoon."

" Every afternoon is a large order. He looks in sometimes after business hours—but as I know he must be tired, I never speak of business—above all, I never ask him questions."

" Laura is quite wonderful," said one.

" What an ideal wife you would be for a business man," said another.

George heard the undercurrent of malevolence in all their talk. He had come in at the close of the entertain-

ment, and they were all gone before he had been there ten minutes. He could hardly follow on the instant.

"Laura Cheveril is making herself impossible," said Mrs. Apperley, with an ominous shake of the head.

"I wonder Miss Mason allows you to know her."

"Oh, she goes everywhere, or at least she used. People are beginning to drop her, I'm afraid, on account of Argentine Jack. He is too much of a Bohemian," concluded Miriam, with the air of one who had never passed the frontier of that mythical land.

"If *you* advise me to drop her, I shall obey you," she said, with a dove-like glance at George.

He hurried away after this.

No doubt the women about her were second-rate, but she shone like a star among them. She had dressed with especial care for her day, and her clothes were exquisite. She might have been a duchess at the top of the fashion. She stood out among shoddy gentilities, as she had done at the "Gilded Lily"—and yet—though he walked through those familiar streets thinking about her, she did not charm him. She might interest him as a character-study—no more to him than one of those vain women in Molière's comedies.

Beauty was no longer paramount in his estimation of a woman. It was no longer beauty that could hold him. He had known a charm more subtle, an attraction not to be defined in words.

Mrs. Apperley at the same time was exulting in the fact that he had disapproved of her association with Lady Cheveril. "It is the first sign of his taking any interest in me," she told Miss Mason, from whom she had no secrets, "and I believe he is just as much in love with me as he was ten years ago."

"It is certainly a good sign," replied her friend, "and I think you may have caught him again. But he is rather an unpromising subject."

"You did not expect him to throw himself at my feet the first afternoon?"

"I didn't, but perhaps you did."

" No, Flory. I knew it would be uphill work after the shabby way I treated him. But the chance of thirty thousand a year, with a man I could turn round my little finger, was worth behaving badly for. Think of the yacht, and the good times ashore, of all the fun we had, instead of pigging in a South Kensington flat with two maids. He couldn't have afforded more then, for he wasn't earning anything, and he was too proud to draw on his uncle. Now, of course, he is as rich as ever Fred was—that's the irony of it. One never knows ! "

XXX

MARY'S winter in Rome had been a season of repose. She had held herself aloof from all society, glad to be alone as regards the great world, and with a feeling that it might be her lot to be alone on the other side of society's border-line for the rest of her life. Rayner had threatened her with disgrace—and she told herself that he would do the worst that an angry man could do. She had defied him without counting the cost. She had refused to be his wife, and she had to reckon with an almost savage enmity. She had but to recall the past, and the revelation of his character in the years of their companionship—his implacable hatred of the men who crossed his will, the men who opposed him when they came to the vital question of self-interest. "I have never been beaten, I have always been top dog." She thought that he would be as implacable in his hatred of her as he had been in more than one case, when something had come between him and his purpose—when he had been found out.

And knowing the man she had to reckon with, she had to face the future, and to contemplate a loss of all that women value in the aspect of their world. She had made a host of acquaintances and a good many friends—real friends, who had valued her for her own sake—people for whom other people's money had no attraction—who did not want to be feasted in a house that they might treat as their inn. She had won the friendship of gifted men and women, to be intimate with whom was an honour—and she had been happy in their society; indeed, for

Mary Tremayne that overworked word "Society" had meant only such friendships. And she told herself that of these even the kindest would fall away from her when they heard her story, as Rayner would tell it—or rather as the women who hung upon him would repeat it at his suggestion.

So she took quiet walks on the Aventine hill, in the sound of convent bells—or in the princely Doria Gardens at dusk. And Garland, walking meekly by her side, wondered at her mistress's curious taste for dull and lonely places, when she might have been looking at the shops in the Corso, which had a lively air when lighted that almost suggested Oxford Street.

Mary loved the lonely places, the byways of Rome, the spots that no tourist ever wanted to see, where no declamatory voice of the hired guide sounded loud and monotonous in the distance. Mary liked the places where there was nothing to see—dull streets that seemed forgotten by the life of to-day—which had drifted away to that modern city of stucco and shoddy—the new Rome beyond the Church of the Angels.

Mary walked in such solitude as she could find for herself, and the lonely places, and the spring twilights had their soothing influences, and she braced herself to meet the future and the worst cloud that John Rayner could spread about her. She had been his victim in the past and she was prepared to be his victim in the future. She had enjoyed her brief reign as a personage; she had been the fashion; and people whose friendship had been worth having had been her friends. But she was strong enough to put all that on one side, as if it were a sumptuous gown she had worn and done with, and to put on her nun's habit, and retire to her convent cell.

After all, there was the London beyond the pale—the greater London where nothing could change—and there would be Austin, her true and loyal friend. If she had to leave the world that had been so dazzling, the world where her reign had been so short, she would not go and spend idle days at Madingley in a life of brooding and dis-

content—as useless as Mariana's in her moated grange—she would establish herself in the Barking Road or at Plaistow, and Austin must plan a new life for her—full of activity and hope—work done for others, happiness contrived for others.

There must always be something to do in the world for a woman with youth and health and money. She could not afford to be idle, to renounce all forward-looking hopes.

And so the days and weeks went by, and there were summer flowers at all the street corners, and the fountains were flashing in the April sunshine, and Tiny and Julia were having what they called the time of their lives. Their Roman winter had been a *succès fou*, they told the lady who paid the bill. If they had not been in the best society, the "black," a fact which they had not quite realized, they had been made much of by a set of rich Americans—the really live people, not fossils or back-numbers, but charming go-ahead matrons who boasted that they were *dans le train*, and whose supper parties in the Colosseum when there was a full moon filled a column in the Paris edition of *The New York Herald*.

"Never was there anyone as generous as you, *carissima mia*," Julia exclaimed apropos of some exceptional expenditure on hospitality in which Mary herself took no share, a girl's luncheon for instance, girls from seventeen to thirty-seven, the kind of thing that was given for "buds" in Boston. "To spend so much upon us, and for things you must despise, after being steeped for years in Uncle Conway's learning."

"You have been twenty times as liberal as any blood relation we ever had," said Clementina; "but what is even more wonderful is the way Aunt Elaine has come out of her shell since we left London, and has forgotten all her dowdy ways and spent some money on her clothes; has left off talking of that sickening garden, and has been a model chaperon."

Elaine had done her work with a will—rejoicing in seeing the Rome that Walter had so wanted her to see,

though he could not afford to take her there. Elaine had taken all labour and responsibility off Mary's shoulders and had more than earned Mary's splendid gifts.

The Sedgwick girls accepted all that was done for them with just a little burst of gratitude after their peculiar fashion now and then. They had each been admired by men of different ideas as to beauty, and each might have married money; but such a marriage would have meant New York or Boston, not Mayfair or Park Lane, and good as it would have been in the way of clothes and jewellery it did not appeal to them.

Everything had been done to gratify them. They had hunted in the Campagna as long as the voice of a hound was to be heard there, and now the April sunshine was almost tropical, and there were no more joyous meetings by the tomb of Caecilia Metella, the Sedgwick girls were talking of London, and the grand things that were going to be done at Warburton House in the coming season.

They told Mary that their mother wanted them at home and they really ought not to leave her any longer alone in that dismal house, to be tyrannized over by her maid and worried by a husband whose conversation at a home dinner was devoted to abusing the cook, and grumbling at the weekly bills. "To think of what I pay the butcher and that the woman can't send up a joint that is eatable!" he repeated, until Julia would murmur in her sister's ear that the governor was a sickening pig!

They were not pleasant, those Eaton Square dinners and the sisters did not wonder that Austin preferred living in rooms, to the home life over which Mr. Sedgwick presided.

Mary saw them depart with a sigh of relief. She had not been much troubled by their company, since their days were delightfully filled, and it was only Aunt Elaine who found them exhausting. An hour in the drawing room in the afternoon, when the new friends whom the girls gathered from day to day were permitted to see the interesting Miss Tremayne, whose romantic history had been made familiar in New York even before it was known in London, was about all of her society that Mary had

vouchsafed to her visitors. She had lived as much apart from them on the Pincian Hill as at Madingley. All they ever had wanted of her was "a good time"—and she had given them that in Rome as in Hampshire, without stint.

They were gone, and she sat alone among her books in the solitude of spacious rooms meant for crowds—rooms in which Princes of the Church had received their courtiers, and great noblemen had squandered their fortunes.

The solitude suited her. She was facing the future—summoning all her force of mind and will to meet the clouds that might be gathering over Warburton House.

XXXI

THE bubble had burst, and the modern South-Sea House had its season of excitement, albeit there were no seething crowds and nobody had been assassinated. Leaflets full of dark hints had lately reached the shareholders, suddenly awakened to the fear that they had been "let in." The magnetic man had, it seemed, magnetized them to a tune that for some might mean ruin—some who had first dabbled and then plunged, and who now saw big losses in front of them.

The tide had turned, and was running with torrential force. The Rastac had his back to the wall, and the crowd confronting him was of the fiercest—gamblers who had asked no questions while he was on the crest of the wave—but who had now become suddenly voracious of information, wanting to have exact figures, strictest accountancy.

No one knew when or why doubt had begun. Dividends had been duly paid—but South America had somehow ceased to be a name to conjure with, Peru no longer represented wealth without limit. Investors had rapidly grown uncomfortable, and had wanted first to reduce their risk, and, later, to get out altogether—but had found escape no easier than it was from the Mississippi Scheme, as the shares that had risen by leaps and bounds were now dropping with a fatal regularity like water oozing out of a leaky vessel.

Argentine Jack had been washing one hand with the other, window-dressing with borrowed assets and paying dividends out of capital. But though hard pushed to

answer certain home questions, he stoutly affirmed the soundness of his finance.

He had not been an impostor from the beginning. All he had told the world about his knowledge of the Great Continent was true. There was scarcely a region in that wonder-world that he had not explored, scarcely an industry that he had not weighed and measured. He knew exactly what had been done, and what still remained to be done—and had seized opportunities that few men would have seen. He had undoubted *flair*—and for some time his enterprises had prospered. Railways in regions where a railway had seemed impossible till he solved geographical problems by sheer audacity, rather than by science, had been accomplished with a success that had stamped him as a true pioneer; and there had been substantial profits, and dividends had surprised the shareholders, whereby the shares had risen in the market, people had begun to talk, and from that to believing that the Rastac was a kind of financial necromancer was but a step. But now all at once those awkward questions were being asked, and special meetings had been called. The parent company was still solvent, perhaps. There were, however, too many of these subordinate schemes, since Rayner had been obliged to start a new one whenever the old ones began to weaken, and his reckless methods had been discovered by certain inquisitive people more difficult to deal with than the general public, who can be caught by an attractive prospectus, and hoodwinked by the plausible statements of a fine speaker. He was a past-master in the composition of a prospectus and he could hold the average meeting spellbound. Without any taste for literature, he had acquired an inexhaustible vocabulary, and had become an adept in the black art of transmuting facts and figures into a rose-tinted cloud of rhetoric. A man with a quick brain and a strong memory can do without book-learning. It was one of Rayner's axioms that only a fool wanted to live with his nose in a book.

"Men are my books," he said, "men and cities."

And now that Rayner had his back to the wall, the shareholders' meetings in the big hotel room, at which he was chairman, were more or less stormy.

He had never been taken seriously by men of business. Only the prosperous idle who wanted to find an easy road to greater prosperity had been his dupes—the people who believe in the talk of men at their clubs, or women at their tea-parties, victims of the collective hallucination of a world in which soft words are accepted as hard facts. Only these had taken every railway and every copper mine he promoted on trust, and now some of them were asking if there had ever been anything more substantial than a prospectus in all these attractive-sounding schemes, and day after day Argentine Jack had to face the situation and answer difficult questions.

Here he had shown himself splendid. The handsome presence, the flashing eyes, the resonant voice with deep music in it, and the ready wit that met and swept away objections, and seemed to answer questions without answering them, and turned every interruption to a good account, all combined to make him a Napoleon among chairmen. But still the stormy, crowded meetings became more tempestuous, the shareholders more virulent, until one day undisguised accusations of fraud and threats of a criminal prosecution were flung at him and his dummy directors—and the once-triumphant chairman knew that the end must be flight or foregone defeat at the Old Bailey.

That was the night when Lady Cheveril saw the last of Jack Rayner, who surprised her by coming to the flat at eleven o'clock, an indiscretion of which he had never before been guilty.

"You have been very kind to me, Laura," he said. "We have been pals, and I wouldn't go away without a good-bye."

"Oh, Jack, what has happened? Why are you going away, and where?"

"I am going because I have got into a tight corner, and don't see my way out. It's a case of no thoroughfare, Laura, nothing but to turn back and take another road.

My other road will be a berth on the Royal Mail. Goodbye, my dear girl, the only woman friend I ever had. If people say hard things about me, and make themselves disagreeable to you on my account, don't mind. You can tell them you didn't know I was a wrong 'un, and that you have lost money by backing me. You haven't really, you know—for the trinkets I've given you are worth a lot more than the margins you stand to lose."

"You are not telling me the truth, Jack! There is no Royal Mail steamer till next month."

"There are other steamers——"

"No. You are thinking of another road. I can see it in your face."

She snatched up his left hand.

"You are still wearing that odious ring!"

"Yes, my mascot."

"Throw it away! It has not brought you luck."

"It did up to a point. Anyhow, I can't part with it yet. I must go now, my dear. *Hasta la vista.*"

He was gone in a flash. She heard the outer door shut before she could follow him into the hall.

He was gone, and she knew somehow that he had gone out of her life for ever.

Mary, who had waited, like Damocles, in a mockery of splendour for the suspended sword to fall, heard nothing of what was going on in that mystery-land—the city. Austin came to see her occasionally; but then he did not read the financial newspapers, in which some far-from-complimentary "open letters" to Mr. John Rayner had appeared. The Engineering Supplement of *The Times* was more in his line, as it concerned the Yard whose interests were so dear to him. And the *Labour Leader* had to be studied carefully, much as it shocked his ideas of universal brotherhood, since it was the organ of a large minority of the men down there on the busy Clyde.

Mary knew nothing—even of the power of money, and Austin could scarcely have enlightened her. He did not possess the wisdom of the serpent, like his uncle. Had

Field been alive he would, without doubt, have shown Mary how to defeat the enemy on his own ground—possibly by selling a big bear of the Transcontinental and so bringing down Rayner's whole house of cards. As it was, she could only wait—helpless—as Austin told her he had once waited for the passage of an avalanche, when climbing in late September above the Trafoïerthal—wondering whether it would sweep him and his companions away or not.

Meanwhile the Sedgwick girls waited also, for the self-promised festivities at Warburton House that did not materialize this season.

One afternoon, Drayson, who felt himself in disgrace for having sold the pass, came to the picture-gallery where Mary was sitting alone, to ask if she was at home.

"Not to strangers," she answered sharply, without looking up from the book she was reading—one of Field's priceless first-editions of a favourite author.

"It's Mr. Bertram, ma'am," said the butler diffidently, flushing with shame at the implied reproof. "He wants to see you most particular. So I thought——"

"Of course I'll see him. He is one of my friends."

"Was he, though?" she asked herself in the interva before George was shown upstairs. "Could a man ever be that when he has wanted to be something more? Austin—yes! He would always be her friend, one with whom she felt at ease and on whom she could count for perfect sympathy—unclouded by a shadow of doubt."

Bertram came towards her without the smile one expects to find in the face of a friend. His expression was thoughtful to the verge of frowning—there was a set look about his mouth—a look of warning in his keen eyes.

"The blow has fallen," thought Mary, bracing herself to meet it.

For a few seconds that seemed minutes neither of them spoke. Then George pulled a crumpled newspaper out of his pocket and said in a husky voice:

"Have you seen this?"

"No."

"Thank God!" he cried with a deep sigh of relief.

Evidently, then, he had not come to denounce her, but rather to save her from some danger—to protect her. And the discovery was peculiarly grateful to Mary.

"I'm not a good hand at breaking things to people—except in the witness-box," he continued, with a forced laugh. "But it is not altogether bad news that I bear; at any rate, not to me."

"Well," she asked, breathing quickly in her impatience to know the worst at once, "what has happened?"

Then, far more gently than she would have supposed possible, he explained his errand.

"I made sure I would be too late. This is the sort of thing some fool would bring to your notice at the earliest opportunity. Perhaps I was a fool to try to tell you before the others; but, you see, I wanted to be there when you heard about it first. I knew Rayner was persecuting you, and yet felt it might be a shock to you to hear that he was no more."

"Dead?"

"Yes. It seems they found the body in a first-class carriage on the District Railway at Ealing—the journey's end—a little before noon to-day. He had entered the train at Blackfriars. There were not many passengers about then, and no one else in the compartment after Hammersmith. Between that station and the stopping-place Rayner must have swallowed a tablet of potassium cyanide, taken apparently from the diamond ring that was found on the seat close by. For there was an opening behind the stone which contained traces of the poison, and the local doctor had no doubt as to the cause of death."

"A terribly painful death," said Mary, shuddering to think how near the dead man had once brought her to a similar fatal step.

"More swift and merciful than many a so-called natural death," said George. "It's the stuff a doctor told me he would take himself—rather than face some of the opera-

tions that prolong our misery. No, depend upon it, in death as in life, he took the easiest way."

"How hard you are sometimes!"

"I've had a good deal to make me hard," he answered gravely, but without his usual bitterness. "And I never was quite so soft as some people. By the by, no letter addressed to anyone else was found on the body. He may not have been much of a sportsman, but he died game—no infernal self-justification—no tell-tale squealing for the coroner to gloat over."

When he was gone, Mary remembered what his uncle had said about him—"not by any means a saint." And yet—he had not pressed the point that she was now free, and she bore him a good heart for that.

After all, Jack had been more to her once than any other man; and, woman-like, she blamed herself for having let him come to such a pitiful end. If only she had tried harder to understand the schemes he used to talk about in those dreary Chelsea days, she might have kept him straight—might have saved him from the self-deception that leads men of his sanguine temperament astray. No doubt he meant well, and, though he was too fond of taking short cuts to the things that tempted him, he had not loved money for its own sake.

Remembering how he had to bolt then, she saw that he must have been in a worse hole now—so could not help feeling glad that he was beyond the reach of man's justice. And Mary hoped that the agony he suffered at the end might be reckoned punishment enough by Him Whose justice she had once presumed to call in question.

With one exception—a ghoulish weekly that always tore every rag of character from the defenceless dead—Rayner had by no means a bad press. At the inquest, which one of Bertram's most eminent clients attended as unobtrusively as possible, the coroner—a physician of wide experience and by way of being a psychologist—struck a sympathetic note, which the papers echoed. He spoke learnedly of the malady of the century—over-

strain—the breaking-point—and called Rayner one of those pathfinders who fail to reach the promised land.

There was, moreover, a pleasing air of mystery about the man's origin, for the Rayners of Castle Rayner maintained a discreet silence. And all his private papers had been destroyed—nothing left to implicate or compromise anybody—" so tactful, don't you know "—" better form than one would have expected in a Rastac."

A reaction set in against the still-clamorous shareholders when the Official Receiver took charge of the Rayner Group. They were unfeelingly described as the " get-rich-quick fraternity," while the distinguished directors were merely styled foolish figure-heads.

The uncharitable attitude of the *London Argus* was all the more marked. It had a large type article with the malignant heading : " Exit Argentine Jack," which was displayed on all its day bills. Here, among other things, Rayner was called " a megalomaniac who imposed on silly women and sillier men—dazzled by the stale old confidence trick in a new dress. The sale of gold bricks in the city enabled him to pay certain doubtful dowagers smart money for an introduction into smart houses.

" The fellow's colossal vanity was evidenced in his absurd pretensions to the hand of a great heiress, who would probably not have recognized him in the crowd that calls itself Society nowadays. Of course, he was a vulgar spell-binder, a common swindler, wherein he was not more guilty but only less fortunate than——" and then followed the names of some successful financiers who had recently departed this life in the odour of sanctity.

Of all Rayner's ventures only the supper-club survived him. One of its latest members was Austin Sedgwick, who gave a constant succession of parties there. This was done to propitiate his frantic sisters for the—to them—inexplicable silence of Warburton House. Single-handed, he had undertaken the task of launching Tiny and Julia in the world they loved—a more formidable business than any launching ever planned at the Yard, but, like all good works, eventually crowned with success.

In the meantime Mary had slipped away to Port Jacob where, if she could not escape from her own thoughts, she was, at any rate, safe from other intruders. The Tremayne Home, which now looked almost as picturesquely peaceful as Fred Walker's Harbour of Refuge, was a fitting tribute to the memory of the father whose love Mary had tried so hard to win. It would have protected her against the lure of another love, only it was given to the dead. There were faults on both sides, but hers, she felt, had been the greater. Not for the first time, she thought of the mother she had never known. And Mary wondered if she would bring father and daughter together again in the shadow-land beyond—where we shall no longer see through a glass darkly, but face to face.

July had come and soon the school holidays would be there, bringing noisy family parties to that quiet spot. Already Mary was thinking of going, she did not know where, when one day an unheralded visitor was announced. Who could it be ?—the parlour-maid gave her no name—Austin, she knew, was busy in London on her behalf—poor fellow. Yet the watchful Zamiel did not bark, for it was an old friend of his who walked into the low-ceilinged private room at the " Ship."

" Come ! " said George, in his startling abrupt way, when the usual greetings had been exchanged. " After those stuffy courts I want a breath of fresh air."

Mary could not help smiling, though in spite of his affected calm she saw that he was in real distress. And before long they had climbed the steep path to the moor, where the heather spread a carpet of pale purple bloom. Zamiel, who had rushed on ahead, began to make rings round them, much as the black poodle circled about Faust when he walked in the fields with his prosaic pupil on Easter day.

It was the place where Mary herself first met the tempter, it seemed ages ago now—in a previous existence. Outwardly all was unchanged, but within nothing appeared the same. It felt as if a thick sea-fog had blown away and the sun was shining at last.

" It's a sin to stay indoors on a day like this," exclaimed George, taking a deep breath.

" I hadn't been in long."

" And I dragged you out again, selfish brute that I am. I know I am selfish, Mary, beastly selfish. But it's no good my pretending to be like Austin."

" It wouldn't do, perhaps, if everyone were as unselfish as he is," said Mary, in a thoughtful tone.

" Look here ! " George broke in quickly. " The man who tries to plead his own cause is an idiot—particularly when he knows that the merits are against him. But won't you take pity, dear ? Help me out ! Don't let me despair again ! You know how much I love you—and it is in your power, Mary, to make me a better man."

Her face grew softer than he had ever seen it look. For he had touched the right note this time. Every woman longs for such a mission, and loves a man for his weakness rather than his strength. As with the angels of God, there is joy among them over one sinner that repenteth, more than over ninety-and-nine just persons.

" You forget that I failed once," in a whisper.

" The past is dead and done with. It is the present I would not have slip away from us," answered George, his deep voice vibrating with long-suppressed emotion. " We have both been cheated of our youth, but our best years are still before us. Don't let us lose them ! For me, dear, you were always the one woman in the world—the most lovable as well as the loveliest."

" What about the lady the picture-papers called the beautiful Mrs. A. ? " she asked with an accent of banter, anxious to stop him.

" She is only a beautiful doll. But who on earth has been talking to you about her ? "

" Julia wrote to me the other day—she and her sister are not fond of you, I fancy—she told me that she was engaged to a nice boy, and, among much gossip, that Mrs. A. was the rage, and people said she was going strong with dear Cousin George."

" They may say what they jolly well like—dear Cousin

Julia won't get a wedding present out of me, though—it is you only that I love, Mary. From the first you drew me towards you, in spite of yourself."

"Perhaps I wished to all the while."

"Did you really?"

"I don't know. I doubt if one ever does—till afterwards."

Once more he clasped her to him, and this time there was no resistance. He trembled all over, as he held her in his arms—trembled with joy at having won her and with fear lest it should not be true, but only another of the tantalizing dreams that had mocked him of late.

Thus their lips met—in a state of trance which sets the spirit free. In a second or two they had descended to earth again, but it was minutes before they could speak of earthly things, and not then without a painful sense of being commonplace. Still, somehow or other, it was settled that George should leave his suit-case at the Railway Inn, and that they should be asked in church by the good Mr. Holditch next Sunday morning as ever was—both of this parish. The wedding was to be very quiet—so quiet, indeed, that most people would only hear of it afterwards—no fuss or frills of any kind, by special request of the bridegroom.

Mary was to be married in a travelling dress, and George was to wear a tweed suit in which he could drive the car. They were to motor down by easy stages to Dunoon, where she was to introduce him to her friends in the Yard—the braw, dour-faced lads with oil-stained hands, the bonnie, smiling lassies and lusty bairns with sun-kissed hair.

First, however, Mary had to come back to London, in order to execute the marriage settlement, which was like a big parchment book that no man save a Chancery barrister might read, being without a single comma, but having several schedules, full of figures, that formed a bulky appendix. When counsel's opinion had been taken on all points arising out of the disposal of as much of their joint wealth as it was deemed advisable to tie up for the benefit of future generations—a seemingly needless

precaution—and the solicitors on both sides had conferred for the last time, Mary, who looked dead-beat, fervently hoped never to need independent advice again. But there was something that weighed on her more than the responsibilities of great possessions, heavy though they were.

"I had such a dear letter from Sir John," Mary told George, as they were leaving the office where the deed had finally been signed, sealed and delivered.

"The judge is a brick," he replied; "and so is dear old Austin. We were always great pals. I'm afraid he'll feel a bit lonely now, poor chap."

"He'll never be lonely while the world is full of unhappy people," said Mary, with a sad smile. "And they will never be without a friend while he lives—I've good reason to know that."

Then in almost a solemn tone she added: "Will you take me somewhere this afternoon, George? It's not far."

"Aren't you too tired?" he asked, noticing the want of timbre in her voice. "No? Well, come along, dear."

She told her chauffeur to drive to the place where he had put her down before in the Fulham Road. And George wondered a little where they were going, but did not ask, as Mary seemed sunk in thought. The car pulled up before it had reached the railway bridge. Getting out, they took a street on the right hand that leads to one of the gates of Brompton Cemetery. They entered and walked, still in silence, along a broad road towards a narrow path off it. At the corner they stood aside to make way for a woman, respectably dressed in black, with a couple of children in their Sunday clothes. Somehow her face struck Mary as familiar, though there was no answering look of recognition in it. She was Norah Lee, of course, the unruly but not ill-natured girl at the Refuge.

"Don't you know me again, Norah?" asked Mary.

"Can't say I do!" said the woman with a troubled expression and an uneasy side-glance at George.

" Surely you remember Mrs. Gurdon's ? "

" I seem to have heard the name somewhere. Bu it's years ago and I've had a lot to think of since. We've brought these "—indicating a modest bunch of flowers— " for my husband's mother who was as good as a mothe to me. Hope you're well, miss ? " And she hurried pas them, dragging her round-eyed children with her.

Norah is right, reflected Mary. It seemed ungrateful but there are things it was perhaps wiser to forget.

Soon they came to a spot where they had to thread thei way between the close-set graves. At length Mary stoppec before a small marble tomb, surrounded by an oblon bower of roses. Though it was beautifully kept, th crimson ramblers were beginning to fade and had go somewhat smoky. It reminded George of a child's red curtained cot—the little one laid to rest by loving hands

" Read what is written there," said Mary, in a voic broken by tears. And, bending over, he read the youn mother's cry of anguish.

" My darling," he said ever so tenderly, holding her han fast in his, " you were scarcely more than a child yoursel when you lost him."

" You know now why there are no orange-blossoms fo me "—sobbing out the words.

" But we will have joy-bells in our hearts. Come look up, be brave, for my "—then, quickly correctin himself—" for the sake of others."

Mary felt an exquisite thrill of pleasure. Already th change in George had begun. Life had for her a new pu pose. The days of fear and doubt were over. Witho being told he understood.

As the blood throbbed wildly through her temples, sh seemed to hear again the music of the mass in some gre Italian church and fresh young voices uplifted in a hym of triumph—and there came back to her, as a speci message of hope, the words : *Sursum corda !*

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Messrs. Hutchinson & Co.

are pleased to announce new Novels for the Autumn of 1916 by the following LEADING AUTHORS, particulars of which will be found in the ensuing pages

LUCAS MALET
BARONESS VON HUTTEN
B. M. CROKER
M. E. BRADDON
H. DE VERE STACPOOLE
MADAME ALBANESI
GABRIELLE VALLINGS
MRS. CAMPBELL PRAED
DOROTHEA CONYERS
PEGGY WEBLING
BERTA RUCK
KATHLYN RHODES
DOUGLAS SLADEN
MRS. BELLOC LOWNDES
CURTIS YORKE
MARAVENE THOMPSON
HELEN PROTHERO LEWIS
FRANKFORT MOORE
M. P. WILLCOCKS
DOROTHY BLACK
G. B. BURGIN
MRS. BAILLIE SAUNDERS
UNA SILBERRAD
H. B. SOMERVILLE
EDGAR JEPSON
ISABEL CLARKE
F. BANCROFT
and
R. W. CAMPBELL
Author of "Private Spud Tamson."

New 6/- Novels

Magpie

By BARONESS VON HUTTEN

Author of "Sharrow," "Pam," etc.

No living novelist has written such charming stories of children as the Baroness von Hutten. Who is there that, once having made the acquaintance in her pages of Pam, will deny her the most completely sympathetic knowledge of childhood, with its own strange and wistful outlook on the world. In the present book she tells the story of the child Mag Pye, the daughter of a gentleman, broken in fortune by his own failings, who has married a pantomime girl. How the child grows up in the Chelsea Workmen's Dwellings and how she fares, with her joys and sorrows, under her unworthy father's vicissitudes, is related in the author's most characteristic manner.

Sister Sorrow

By Mrs. CAMPBELL PRAED

Author of "Lady Bridget in the Never-Never Land," etc.

The scene of the novel is laid in Australia—at Leichardt's Town and on Oronga Island, off the northern coast. The incidents are sensational and deal with a prophetic dream and its fulfilment. 'Sister Sorrow,' otherwise Dolores Lloyd, a young Welshwoman, is governess to the Carfax girls. Agatha Carfax, their half-sister, tells the story of Dolores Lloyd, for whom she has a very deep sisterly friendship. The two women meet simultaneously the two men who affect their lives, one of whom Dolores recognises as the hero of a fateful dream, which she has told to Agatha.

New 6s. Novels.

Damaris

By LUCAS MALET

Author of "Sir Richard Calmady," etc.

The above long novel, which is the fruit of many years of thought and work, will in all probability prove to be the author's best and most important work of fiction.

The scene of the novel is laid in Northern India, where the father of Demaris, General Verity, a famous soldier of the Mutiny, occupies a distinguished command.

The descriptions of Indian life and scenery are depicted in vivid language.

The Eyes of the Blind

By M. P. WILLCOCKS

Author of "Change," "The Wings of Desire," "The Power Behind," etc.

Miss Willcocks' new novel is the story of one who regained his eyesight after an operation with most disconcerting results. We are often told that it is folly to be wise if ignorance is bliss. In this novel we are asked whether, if blindness means happiness, one should therefore shrink from the light. It is a story more intense in its drama than her recent books, since, like "Wings of Desire," it deals mainly with West Country types, and, like "The Wingless Victory," it is a novel of temptation and of the love that conquered after a hard fight. Miss Willcocks has gone back to the old simple things that are as old as man and woman, though here, too, there is the interest of opposing social and religious atmospheres, and here again many of the "saints" are but whited sepulchres.

The Head Man

By F. BANCROFT

Author of "The Veldt Dwellers," etc.

Like the earlier novels by this writer the present book is a convincing story of South African life. It is a fragment of life as it was and is lived in that country, the space of time covered in the narrative being considerable. The story, which opens shortly after the Boer war and closes with the annexation of South West Africa in the present war, deals with the fortunes of a family. The young English widow of a Boer farmer in her need makes the desperate bargain with a Boer that he is to work as her partner for ten years, and her daughter, who will at the expiration of that period be seventeen, is to be his wife. What is the result of this compact must be left to the author to tell, but the end is not reached without many exciting complications.

Hearts and Sweethearts

By MADAME ALBANESI

Author of "Poppies in the Corn," etc.

In her latest book Madame Albanesi has provided a plot which is full of dramatic and romantic incidents centreing round a little child's claim to an old title and big estates. The story is set in the present strenuous time, and Madame Albanesi just lightly touches on the changes which war has wrought inevitably in our lives, our thoughts, and our outlook for the future. It is a novel with a delightful hero and a loveable heroine, and should command popularity.

New 6s. Novels.

The Reef of Stars: A Romance of the Tropics

By H. DE VERE STACPOOLE

Author of "The Blue Lagoon," "The Pearl Fishers," &c.

The title under which this novel was previously announced, namely, "Treasure: A Romance of the South," having been already used, the author has had to substitute the above title.

The story opens at daybreak in Sydney, where Houghton, the penniless wanderer, meets Macquart, the ragged, penniless ex-convict, with a fortune in his head. The streets of Sydney rise up before the reader, who hurries along, fascinated, in the company of Houghton, Bobby Tillman, Curlewis, Macquart, and the inscrutable Screed, on the business of fitting out a treasure-hunting expedition to search for the gold *cache* known to Macquart. The story of the search, of the finding of Agala, the girl with the corsets of brass, of the great thorn maze of New Guinea, and of how the gold literally seizes the villainous Macquart, make up a romance of love and adventure fresh and fascinating, and filled with the light of youth and morning.

Miss Braddon's last novel.

Mary

By M. E. BRADDON

Author of "Lady Audley's Secret," &c.

A posthumous full length story of this delightful novelist, who enjoyed the unequalled fortune of holding a first place in the public estimation for half a century, during which period she gave pleasure to millions of her readers. This book, which was written mainly before the war, is Miss Braddon's last novel, and deals with the things that do not change. Mary, betrayed and deserted by a brilliant adventurer, passes through storm and calm to the shelter of a good man's love although for a time she thinks herself unworthy of him.

Boundary House

By PEGGY WEBLING

Author of "Virginia Perfect."

Peggy Webling's new book is a tale of London life, beginning in the seventies and ending three or four years ago. Although the plot is more pronounced than in her former novels, it is essentially a study of different characters, the scenes being laid in a little shop in Bayswater, a mysterious house on the river, and a Kentish village. The author has devised, as usual, a quaint and original background for her story of love and grief and joy. It is a home of toys, and the master of the toy-makers, cunning old Fob, is the central figure—an old riddle for the reader to solve.

The Alternate Life

By CURTIS YORKE

Author of "Disentangled," "Her Measure," &c.

This is a romance of a man and a girl who found out how to meet in dreams, though they were separated by thousands of miles. In these dreams they grew better acquainted with one another than they could ever have done in the few opportunities they had had for actually meeting. Dreamland and real life are cleverly mingled in this story, which has the advantage of being distinctly unusual.

Given in Marriage

By B. M. CROKER

Author of "Her Own People," "In Old Madras," "Lismoyle," etc., etc.

A new novel of Indian Hills and English plains. Mrs. Croker has practically made the particular field of Anglo-Indian life, which forms the subject of so many of her novels, her own.

Bindweed

By GABRIELLE VALLINGS

"Bindweed" is the first story by a new writer, who, as a great-niece of Charles Kingsley and a cousin of Lucas Malet, has inherited not a little of the genius of the family, with great powers of constructing a realistic scene. The author deals with the operatic world in Paris and London. It concerns the training of a young prima donna, and her connection with a distinguished singer who interests himself in the development of her voice. Incidentally the book touches on peasant life in a French country village, and has a strong plot which turns graphically on certain aspects of French character among the underworld of Paris.

A story of sunshine, love and happiness.

Persuasive Peggy

By MARAVENE THOMPSON

Author of "The Woman's Law."

This is a delightful novel. Peggy is a bright, active, charming, beautiful, clever, wilful and original heroine. The account of her performances after her marriage makes entertaining reading. It is a humorous and stimulating story, wholesome and tonic. Peggy's stubborn husband has a time of it—all for his good and improvement; and each improves the other but not with conscious motive; the two are real mates.

A Friend Indeed

By F. FRANKFORT MOORE

Author of "I Forbid the Banns," etc.

Mr. Frankfort Moore's readers will find in his new novel much more plot than they have become accustomed to associate with his stories; and for the working out of his scheme on a broad scale he has introduced some of the strongest characters he has yet drawn. The hero, on the strength of his friendship for a somewhat weak companion, the son of his employer, endeavours to exculpate him for an offence which would have brought about his ruin, and alienation from his family and the charming girl to whom he has just become engaged. He is successful, but only at the sacrifice of himself.

The Trading of Gannymede Bun

By DOROTHEA CONYERS

Author of "The Strayings of Sandy," (*14th Edition*), etc.

The hero of this story, Gannymede Bun, was formerly a clerk in a London store, when he receives an unexpected bequest from an aunt. He has always longed to ride and live in the country, and he resolves to speculate his capital in horses with a view to increasing his inheritance. He goes over to Ireland, where he makes plenty of good friends, notwithstanding his odd language and other peculiarities, and he falls in love, His relatives try, but are not successful in their endeavours, to prove him mad.

New 6s. Novels.

Lilla: a Part of her Life

By Mrs. BELLOC LOWNDES

Author of "Good Old Anna" (*4th Edition*), &c.

As in "Good Old Anna," the scene of Mrs. Belloc Lowndes's new story is laid in England during the War. It is a poignant, searching study of a human heart and conscience, and the problem which Lilla has to solve is at once the most balanced and the most dramatic which can be presented to a modern woman. "Lilla: a Part of her Life," will appeal to every woman who looks forward to love, who loves now, or who has loved in the past.

The Girls at His Billet

By BERTA RUCK

Author of "His Official Fiancée" (*14th Edition*), &c.

This is a "modern-to-the-minute" love-story; that of a pretty, high-spirited but artless "flapper" and of the young New Army subaltern, who is billeted at her house and whom she nicknames The Incubus. Her own romance is bound up with those of her sisters, mischievous Nancy and highly-conscientious Evelyn. A Zeppelin raid that ends well, a packet of letters to a lonely soldier, and a side-car elopement are incidental to the story, which is told in her own style by the youngest of the girls.

The Man with a Square Face

By DOROTHY BLACK

Author of "Her Lonely Soldier."

If you want a quite new type of story, read this. There is a breeziness about it that is indescribably fascinating, and the subtlest, most delightful sense of humour. One of its greatest charms is its unexpectedness: one never knows what is coming next. The heroine, as a girl, longs for something to happen; when she grows up, things happen so fast that she prays that they may stop happening. The story is very breezy and original.

Love and the Whirlwind

By HELEN PROTHERO LEWIS

(Mrs. JAMES J. G. PUGH)

The scene of this striking novel is laid in Wales, a wild and beautiful setting. The story is intensely dramatic. The earlier portion deals with the adventures of a beautiful girl, in the home amidst the mountains, of the Vychan family: a mad mother and two lawless sons. Both brothers fall in love with their beautiful guest, and it seems as if no power in heaven or earth could stem the whirlwind of disaster that ensues. We watch the characters swept along to tragedy by what appears to be a resistless Fate.

Rose Lorraine

By DOUGLAS SLADEN

Author of "The Tragedy of the Pyramids."

Mr. Sladen's new novel is pure romance. Miles Coverdale, a typical public-school and university man, great at sports, but not trained for any profession, although he has to earn his own living, is wondering how he shall do it, when the war breaks out ; and he enlists and wins a commission and rapid promotion. The heroine, Rose Lorraine, is the beautiful daughter of a man who has gambled away his property and has become gatekeeper to one of his boon companions. Rose has been looked after and educated by an uncle, but on leaving school she returns to live at her father's lodge. This delightful story is chiefly concerned with the wooing of Rose by Miles, but the course of his love runs anything but smoothly.

The Mark of Vvaye

By H. B. SOMERVILLE

Author of "Ashes of Vengeance," (4th Edition), etc.

The scenes of this story are laid chiefly in Brittany at the end of the 15th Century ; and it deals with conflicts, both of wills and weapons, which arise from marriage by trickery of a Breton lady, Yvonne de Vvaye, to her family's most bitter enemy and the murderer of her brother. It also introduces the plots of the Breton nobles to depose Pierre Landais from his high position in the Court of hautes as the chief favorite of the last Duke of Brittany.

The Inheritance

By UNA L. SILBERRAD

Author of "The Mystery of Barnard Hanson," &c.

Miss Silberrad's unquestionable gifts of writing a story of engrossing interest are displayed to the fullest in her new novel, the publication of which is promised during the present season.

New 6/- Novels

The Lure of the Desert

By KATHLYN RHODES

Author of "The Will of Allah," "The Desert Dreamers," &c.

This is the story of an Englishman, who, having Arab blood in his veins, shakes off the shackles of western civilization and responds to the call of the desert, which appeal he finds it impossible to resist. The charm of desert life has formed a background for many of Miss Rhodes's popular stories, and in the present one the reader is made to realise much of its wonderful fascination.

The Potter's House

By ISABEL C. CLARKE

Author of "The Lamp of Destiny," &c.

Miss Clarke's new novel is concerned with the early days of the War, and its effect upon her little group of characters is related with skill and discernment, and is typical too of those first anxious weeks. And it is the War, which incidentally completes the spiritual awakening of her heroine, Gillian Driscoll. Some of the earlier chapters contain charming descriptions of Italy, and of life in Rome in the spring of 1914.

The Distaff Dreamers

By Mrs. BAILLIE SAUNDERS

Author of "Litany Lane," "The Mayoress's Wooing," &c.

A picturesque, quaint and charming story of London life, with an ancient and largely demolished city church, St. Ursula Distaff's, Watergate Stairs, as the centre round which this comedy is played. The hero, who is a prosperous architect, belongs to an old city family. He is a devoted Anglican and believes that he has a vocation for celibacy, but owing to the reported death of his cousin in Flanders, he learns that he is heir to the estates, and consequently realises that unless he can find a member of some collateral branch, it will be his duty to marry in order to perpetuate the ancient line of his family. How the author develops this situation must be left for her to tell in her own words.

Esther Lawes

By EDGAR JEPSON

Author of "The Lady Noggs," &c.

In "Esther Lawes" Edgar Jepson tells the realistic romantic story of a young English governess in the house of a West-Indian planter. The West-Indian life and its effect on the sensitive girl are fully described; and the book is full of local colour in its true atmosphere. It rises to the romantic height in its treatment of the birth and growth of her passion for the formidable hunch-back, the enemy of her employer's family and the virtual ruler of the strange district in which they dwell.

The Girl Who Got Out

By G. B. BURGIN

Author of "The Shutters of Silence," &c.

The scene of this new novel which is laid partly in England and partly in Canada. The heroine, in pursuance of a promise to her dying father, and to improve her own impoverished fortunes, "gets out" of England in order to put right the moral and physical tone of a young "waster" who is going to the dogs. How she persuades him to try his fortunes in a new land and "find himself" in primeval solitudes, is told with all Mr. Burgin's customary vivacity and charm. Everyone expects the heroine to marry him, but what happens to the heroine is———the rest of the story.

Messrs. Hutchinson & Co. are pleased to announce that they will publish shortly a new book by R. W. CAMPBELL, author of "Private Spud-Tamson."

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